3

ANDERSON UNIVERSITY
[redacted]
3 2197 01024148 3

PS 3503 .08193 W45 1946
Bower, B. M.
White wolves

WHITE WOLVES

WHITE WOLVES

By

B. M. BOWER

Sinclair, Bertha (Muzzy) 1874-1940

THE BLAKISTON COMPANY

Philadelphia

TRIANGLE BOOKS EDITION PUBLISHED JANUARY 1946
By arrangement with Little, Brown, & Company

COPYRIGHT, 1927, BY LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY

All rights reserved

TRIANGLE BOOKS is a series published by
The Blakiston Company, 1012 Walnut St., Philadelphia 5, Pa.

PRINTED AND BOUND IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE AMERICAN BOOK—STRATFORD PRESS, INC., N. Y. C.

Charles E. Wilson Library
Anderson Coll

PS
3503
.O8193
W45
1946

Contents

I. What Lay Over the Hill . 3
II. Lawrie Tries His Hand at Allegory 15
III. "Cow Thief's a Hard Name to Call a Man" . . . 27
IV. Nothing to Do but Go . . 37
V. The Meadowlark Sits in Judgment 49
VI. On the Trail of Romance . 56
VII. Lawrie Learns About Loneliness 63
VIII. A Gamble 74
IX. The White Wolves Howl . 84
X. The Dance at the Frying Pan 93
XI. Bud Takes a Hand . . . 103
XII. Devil Take the Hindmost . 115
XIII. A Lamb in Wolf's Clothing . 134
XIV. The Lord of the Island Rides Abroad 143
XV. The River Reaches for Kid Kern 152
XVI. Lawrie Wonders . . . 161
XVII. Lawrie Follows the Moon Path 173

Charles E. Wilson Library
Anderson College
Anderson, Indiana 46011

120157

Contents

XVIII. Lawrie Finds Enchantment . 181
XIX. Quicksand 198
XX. Lawrie Rebels 212
XXI. "The White Wolves Will Hang Your Hide on the Fence" 219
XXII. In the White Wolves' Den . . 230
XXIII. Kid Has a Heart-to-Heart Talk with Lawrie . . 241
XXIV. "Kid Kern Knows" . . 254
XXV. "Speckled Ones, Mr. Lawrie?" 261
XXVI. Kid Pays a Debt . . . 270
XXVII. "Swallow Your Pride and Shake!" 280
XXVIII. What's a Quarrel Between Real Friends? . . . 288
XXIX. "He's a Wolf, but He's White!" 296

WHITE WOLVES

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT LAY OVER THE HILL

At the outward point of a sharp bend in the trail that wound steadily up a long, deep canyon split through the shattered hills along the Missouri, Lawrie stopped the little bay horse Jasper and turned himself in the saddle so that he could look down upon the scene he was half regretfully leaving behind him. Far below in the middle distance, seen through a gap in the hills, the river lay like a ribbon of argent sheen thrown carelessly down upon a royal robe left in a torn and wrinkled heap that still bore an air of grandeur as if, coming from the loom of kings, common folk must kneel and press lips upon the royal coronet woven into its tattered fabric. Or so it seemed to the artist soul of Lawrie Brunelle, which must weave fanciful meaning into the things he met in his daily wanderings or fret at the hard limitations of the utterly commonplace.

Jasper stood puffing a little after the steepness of the trail, his sweaty flanks drawn rapidly in and out with the short breaths he drew, punctuated with occasional deep sighs as if he were thinking with profound thankfulness that a horse may

have a harder master than an artist who must draw rein on every height and dream and gaze for half an hour at a stretch, without remembering that he must be getting on if he would not spend the night in the hills. Jasper had acquired the habit of snatching mouthfuls of grass and tender twigs as he went along — else he would many a time have gone hungry. And since he never failed to stop and drink at every stream large or small, and to turn aside for a swallow or two from such springs as gushed up from the hidden waters of the hills, he remained a sleek horse of placid disposition, no matter what moonings his rider might indulge in along the way.

"I must be getting home," Lawrie told himself uneasily after ten minutes of silent gazing. "The whole Meadowlark outfit will be out hunting me, if I don't show up." Yet he did not move, and Jasper, who had pointed one ear backward when Lawrie spoke, let it droop forward again and relaxed, shifting his weight on his legs so that he stood "hip-shot" and ready for a nap; to all of which signs of perfect understanding Lawrie gave no heed. For Lawrie did not know horses a hundredth part as well as Jasper knew men — he having spent much of his life in studying their moods and methods, while Lawrie concerned himself only with the fortunate circum-

stance that the little bay was gentle and easy to ride.

"I really ought to be getting back," Lawrie repeated, after another dreamy lapse. "Lord, if a man could ever get that translucent glow on canvas he'd have the world at his feet! Or that blare of purple and red in that cloud over there——" He fell silent again, absorbed in the changeful spectacle of sunset which no man could ever hope to reproduce with pigments and brush.

As his gaze dropped, surfeited at last with the splendor of the distant peaks, a nearer view caught and held his attention. Down the canyon, a row of pine trees stood dark against the sky, a solemn line that seemed to have halted in a march up a smooth slope and over the crest until the plumed tops of the vanguard barely showed above the brow of the hill. From the lower trail, the unusual regularity of the line had not been noticeable. Now it looked as if the trees had been planted there to mark a boundary of some sort; though that could not be true, since these hills were empty of human habitation or cultivated fields. Moreover, the trees were too huge to have grown within the memory of any white man in Montana; before the time of Lewis and Clarke, before civilization had pushed across the Mississippi, the largest of those trees had been seed-

lings. Yet, regularly spaced as if their planting had been marked with a tape line and stakes, those great pines stood all in a row and flung wide-armed branches aloft over the ripened grasses of the hillside. An intriguing sight; one to coax the imagination of a more stolid nature than Lawrie Brunelle, tenderfoot artist who would loiter along the trail to look and to dream, forgetful of his errand to a neighbor and of the probability that his boss might be waiting to hear the result of his trip.

"Lord, I'd like to know what took those old duffers over the hill, Indian file like that!" he exclaimed suddenly, bringing Jasper to a startled preparation for the resumption of the journey. "I suppose I ought to be getting on. The Meadowlark is pretty well accustomed to my poking home all hours of the night, though. Couldn't make it by supper-time now, if I could fly; might as well die for an old sheep as a lamb, anyway. Won't take long to see what's over the hill — those old fellows are surely marching over to have a look at some sort of witch's brew — or maybe there's a council hall down in the next canyon. Guess I'll have to ride over there and have a look before I ride back to the everyday world. Why is it, I wonder, that people always take the picture value out of things? If that row of trees

was planted by some rough-necked old farmer, they'd be simply a row of enormous pine trees, set out to mark a section line. Growing there of their own accord, they're darned tantalizing."

As he gathered up the reins that had been lying loose upon the horse's neck, Jasper heaved a sigh of resignation and prepared to retrace his steps down the steep trail. He did not hurry, since the home pasture of the Meadowlark lay a long ten miles beyond the ridge that blocked the head of the canyon they had been climbing; nor did his rider spur him forward as many another would have done. Wherefore the long twilight was merging into dusk when at last they topped the hill and Lawrie pulled up under the biggest of the pines and looked down into the canyon beyond.

Here the regularity of the column was lost in a scattered grove which covered the steep canyon side. Already the wooded ravine was dark, a place of gloomy isolation which not even a romantic young tenderfoot could possibly want to explore for the pleasure of it. Yet the deep shadows held Lawrie for a space, staring down into the blackness and listening to the uneasy whisperings of the pine branches high over his head.

He was on the point of turning back when the bay horse half turned, tossed his head and began

a low nicker which he seemed to think it not worth while to finish; listened and looked, until apparently he had satisfied himself that the thing which had attracted his attention held no element of mystery, and relapsed into his philosophic calm. But his action roused Lawrie more completely from his musings and he, too, looked and listened.

In a few minutes he could plainly hear the click of hoofs which told that a number of horses or cattle were coming down the long ridge toward him, and presently he distinguished the little sounds that betrayed the riders: the creak of saddle skirts, the faint clinking sound of spur and bridle chains. A calf gave a sudden, frightened blat, and a man's voice muttered an oath.

Jasper eyed the approach with apathetic interest, evidently quite satisfied to wait until he was called upon to play his part in the drive, or still better pleased to be left out of it altogether. Lawrie's interest lay chiefly in the vague shadows that took form and substance as the group approached in the murky glow that still remained of the sunset on the higher ground.

"I got a bunch spotted down in this canyon," a voice broke the silence of the riders. "We could pick 'em up easy. I know about where they are."

"No use," another voice replied. "Hazin' 'em outa the brush in the dark ain't any picnic. Let 'em go."

"Say, I never let no five dollars walk away from *me*," the first voice protested. "We're going right past there — I'll take 'em in myself, then. I ain't doing this for exercise; it's the dollars that counts."

"Yeah, you're dog-goned right," a third voice spoke approval of the sentiment. "We'll pick 'em up if they're handy."

The objector said no more, and presently the group had passed, swinging away from the pine trees as they dipped over the first sloping descent, evidently following a trail of some kind which Lawrie had not discerned in the gloom.

He waited there until they were gone: three riders and perhaps a dozen head of cattle, old and young together trooping down into the blackness with occasional little snuffles and snorts of dislike for the steepness of the trail; mysterious shadows emerging from the last glow upon the higher reaches, taking visible form as they drifted past, then vanishing into the Cimmerian abyss of the wooded ravine, sending back those intangible little clicking sounds of hoofs striking against rock.

"The wolves are running to-night," muttered

Lawrie, thrilling oddly to the fanciful interpretation of the incident. "I never thought I'd be lucky enough to see them at their hunting. God, if I could make shadows palpitate with life and — and the mystery of night, the way those did! Sinister — that's it; the sinister sense of mystery — dark deeds — thunder! I'm a darned sight clumsier with words than I am with the brush, but I can feel it all, and that's more than I could say for Marge. She's got the words, but they don't bring the picture to life, somehow. Trouble is, Marge doesn't *feel* the things she writes. I can feel it all, but I can't express it, even with paint.

"Wolves — human wolves that run silently in the dark, not even raising the hunting cry to warn honest folk of the range. I know it, but I couldn't for the life of me explain how I know. It's as if a noxious atmosphere runs with them, shouting that here are the night wolves preying upon their fellow men — oh, devil take words! Wake up, Jasper, and hit the trail for home. I'd tell Marge, if I thought she could make anything of it. Maybe she could have, if she had been here to see them pass."

Marge was his sister who hoped to write stories that would sell, just as Lawrie longed to paint pictures that would live. The difference between

the two was largely a difference of soul, for they looked much alike. Marge seemed content with the surface of life; Lawrie saw deeper and fretted because he could not always grasp what he vaguely discerned in the depths. He knew his limitations; Marge recognized none within herself but laid the blame of failure upon an unappreciative public.

As he rode homeward in the dark, Lawrie found himself thrilling again and again to the memory of that shadowy glimpse of the under side of range life; the passing of three cattle thieves driving their plunder down into the blackness of the wooded canyon and speaking of their profit in the matter-of-fact tones of men who ride abroad upon legitimate business with the full accord of their neighbors, to win an honest living on the range.

"Five dollars a head!" wondered Lawrie, new to range life, yet already owning a fair knowledge of the business of raising cattle for profit. "That isn't much to turn wolf for. Still, if they steal enough cattle, I suppose it does count up. Five dollars a head — and who pays them the money?"

The fact that rustlers were at work upon the range was common talk at the Meadowlark and Lawrie had heard many theories as to the manner in which the work was carried on. No one seemed to know exactly where the cattle went or who

was responsible for the steady shrinking of the herds. Every cattle owner in the country seemed to suffer alike and to be equally helpless in putting a stop to the thieving. From listening to much bunk-house gossip Lawrie knew that every man in the country had a visible means of support. Even the undesirables of Smoky Ford, the nearest town on the Little Smoky River, could give a fairly satisfactory account of themselves and certainly seemed to lack the energy and initiative for any systematic plundering of the range. The one shady outfit in the country near Smoky Ford had been eliminated when a bank robbery cleared itself of all mystery with the killing of two men at the Palmer ranch and the recovery of the stolen money. Now Palmer himself had sold out and left the country, and his ranch was occupied by a family from Fort Benton whom every one knew and liked.

That trouble zone having been transformed into a place where one might ride in at the gate at any hour of the day or night and be sure of a welcome, there remained only one other ranch where it was possible the rustlers might be harbored. That ranch was the Frying Pan, down near the Missouri.

The Frying Pan Ranch, however, operated strictly as a horse ranch. Kid Kern and his

brother Tom owned the place, and though it was said that their crew of riders could none of them look a sheriff in the eye, that shyness was known to have been born of trouble elsewhere, and no one had ever accused them of stealing cows and calves off the range. A cattle man would scarcely be suspected of stealing sheep, nor would a horse ranch be easily suspected of stealing cattle. That much Lawrie had learned and he remembered it now.

"All the others are nice people, and there isn't an outlaw gang in the country," he told himself as he rode along. "I ought to know that well enough, after hearing Marge bewail the fact at least once a day since we landed in Smoky Ford. She'd give her right eye to discover a real band of stage robbers here, and if I tell her I actually saw some cattle being stolen, she'd want to come right over, I suppose, and follow their trail.

"Maybe that's what I should have done," he added uneasily. "I might have found out who they were and where they were going, and I could have told Lark. I guess I'm an awful chump. All I thought of was the picture value of their shadowy forms growing out of the dusk, and the thrill of being so close to the mystery of them. Sat there on my horse like a fool and let them go — when I might have challenged them and

been kidnapped and shot, and made a hero for Marge to write about! "

He grinned wryly at the thought of it and decided that, since he had played so sorry a part and had nothing to tell that would help identify the thieves, he would say nothing at all about it.

CHAPTER TWO

LAWRIE TRIES HIS HAND AT ALLEGORY

For three days Meadowlark Basin had lain shrinking under a howling, buffeting wind, hot with the fevered breath of late August. It shriveled the corn that grew down along the bank of the Little Smoky and turned pumpkin and Hubbard squash leaves into withered little green umbrellas, half closed and drooping on yellowed stalks. It made the horses in the bronk corral skittish and nervous, full of snorts and sudden rushes and meaningless alarms. A season of short tempers among the men who were breaking the horses for fall round-up work.

Windows rattled and doors banged. The stovepipe blew off the roof of the mess house and the fried potatoes were deluged with soot, upon which the smoke-blinded cook clapped a tin kettle lid in haste and without caring very much just what he covered from sight in the skillet.

Two men ran to his assistance and spent more than half an hour and much profanity before the battered pipe was restored and wired firmly to the roof with baling wire, and even then the stove refused to draw oxygen into its iron lungs but spewed forth smoke from every crack and would

not heat the oven until it was discovered Tony Scarpa had dropped his glove down the stovepipe while working on the roof. By the time the pipe had been unwired, taken apart and made to disgorge the glove — much shriveled by heat and altogether useless — the daily baking of bread had gone sour and ran over in the oven.

Johnny, the cook, refused to make biscuits, but cut ragged slices of the soggy bread and placed two great piles upon the table, and it was after the meal that followed these minor catastrophes when Lawrie appeared, late for his supper and wearing an intolerably elated air. The glow of creative ardor still shone in his eyes and blinded him to the unfriendly atmosphere, though the room was surcharged with carping criticism.

Heedless of the significant absence of the usual chorus of good-natured jibes, he battled through the whooping gale and entered, a wrapped canvas clutched tightly under one arm. All through the past three days of high wind and higher words, his ignorance of horse-breaking had left him free to follow his own devices, and he had seized upon the time to paint a picture. Now here he was, like a lamb going of its own accord to the slaughter, anxious to show what he had done and hoping for friendly criticism and perhaps a word of praise.

"Shut that door!" some one yelled at him when a gust tore the heavy planking from his long fingers and flung it back against the inner wall with a bang. "Where the devil was you raised? In a barn?"

The fifty-mile gale whooped across the long table, scattering dust and disorder while the artist shifted his canvas to a firmer position under his arm and pulled at the door. He was a tall young man and not nearly so delicate as his chosen art might lead one to expect, yet it took his full strength to force the door shut in the teeth of the wind. But he accomplished the feat without assistance and grinned cheerfully at the morose gathering.

"What's wrong, my hale and hearty cow gentlemen? Is this searing simoon beginning to pall upon your action-jaded nervous systems? Then I have come at an auspicious moment to smooth the troubled frowns from your high intellectual brows. Forget your woes while you gaze upon a masterpiece fresh from its creator's mind and fingers."

"Aw, don't git too gay with them big words, Lightfoot. We ain't any of us in no merry mood to-day. You're liable to be tore apart, and the pieces might git scattered in this wind so you wouldn't git put together again!"

harles E. Wilson Library
nderson College
nderson, Indiana 46011
120157

"Say, Lightfoot is so darn limber he'd hop together like a hoop snake," big Mark Hanley amended with a sneer in his voice that took all the humor out of the jibe.

Lawrie stopped at the end of the table and regarded the heavy face of the man, his eyes hardening a little as their glances met and clashed. He sent a measuring look from one moody face to the other, gave a lift of the shoulders and sat down, reaching uninterestedly for the platter of cold boiled beef. Even a tenderfoot cannot be expected to remain so very tender after a couple of months or more spent under the capricious tutelage of the Meadowlark boys, and it occurred to Lawrie that perhaps this was not the time for an art exhibit. He began to devote himself to the unappetizing food, wishing that he had heeded Maw's urging to eat with the family. He had been too anxious to show the boys his picture. Now he decided that he would say no more about it; after all, what could they possibly know about art?

Suddenly Tony Scarpa gave a suppressed howl and clapped a palm over his mouth. The boys looked at him expectantly while he explored within with thumb and finger.

"Anybody," he cried savagely, "that calls himself a cook and leaves cherry pits bogged down

in a pie, had oughta be shot! Made me bust a tooth, dog-gone yuh!"

"Say, you never roared about cherry pits while you was gorgin' down the first piece, nor the second, either!" Johnny made spirited retort. "If you wanta git into the trough with your feet, you can eat pits an' all, same as other hawgs do."

"That's all your damn pies is fit for — hawgs," Tony came back at him. "Cherry pie with half the pits left in — that's a hell of a way to cook!"

"You don't like my cookin', you can tie on an apron and take over the job yourself!" cried Johnny, getting red in the face. "I'd sure hate to eat your cookin', though. I bet ——"

"Say, Lightfoot, what's your picture about? Another one of them buckin' broncho scenes?" Frank Gelle, whom his fellows called Jelly as a friendly slap at the way his name was spelled, inquired in a speciously eager tone; not that he was keenly interested in art or cared what Lawrie's latest subject might be, but because he hated wrangling. "Le's see that masterpiece of yours."

Brunelle looked up, plainly hiding a suspicion that this might be a trap. But Gelle's manner disarmed him and he responded with his eyes glowing again.

"No, it isn't bucking horses this time, Jelly. I find that I have about exhausted the possibilities

of ranch life from a picture angle. I think I've been living too close to it, perhaps. At any rate, this is something altogether different; something I ran across when I was riding home from Mr. Anderson's ranch the other night."

"Horse stepped on it, hunh?" Mark inquired, but his heavy wit went unregarded by the artist.

"This is what you might call allegorical. Marge asked me for something which she could write a story around, using the picture for an illustration. And since this has been growing in my mind——"

"Kinda like a boil, I s'pose!" Mark cut in again with disagreeable insistence.

Lawrie made no reply to that, either. But his thin, sensitive face with its young tan—but lately past the stage of red and painful sunburn—flushed a bit under the meaningless taunts which were beginning to rasp his nerves.

He buttered an uneven slice of the soured bread, wondering what fatuous impulse had driven him to bring his new painting to the supper table for the inspection and praise of these fellows, who made light of everything that came within their definition of highbrow. He had been guilty of yielding to a childish impulse to cry, "See me!" and show what he could do, he thought impatiently while he ate his supper, out-

wardly calm but rather sick of the place, if the truth were known.

"Well," Jack Rosen said, when Lawrie finally pushed back his plate, stacking knife, fork, spoon and cup upon it as the Meadowlark outfit had taught him to do, "come alive, Lightfoot, and show us this picture that's different and has got a deeper meaning to it. What's it about, for gosh sake? Forty-miles-from-breakfast-on-a-cold-winter's-night?"

"No, he says he run acrost it between here and Chris Anderson's," Tony Scarpa reminded him.

"You fellows don't have to look at it, you know," Lawrie told them offishly, getting up from the table as if he meant to go.

"Aw, le's see it, Lightfoot!" three voices chorused penitently. And Tony added for good measure, "Can't yuh stand a little joshin' yet? I got the toothache, but I'm tryin' to be cheerful and gay, just the same."

"Sure, we was just joshin' yuh, Lightfoot. You get so darn serious when you paint a new picture that we can't help takin' a fall outa yuh, just to keep you human."

"I don't think I'm any the less human because pictures mean as much to me as riding horses means to you fellows. I suppose I'd be shot if I ridiculed your work half as much as you ridicule

mine." He hesitated, then picked up the canvas from where it stood against his chair. "I don't expect it to appeal to you as much as a bucking horse would," he added, with some sarcasm, "but still it conveys a meaning which should interest any range man."

He glanced toward the windows to see which let in the best light for his purpose, pushed the dishes toward the center of the table, pulled a gallon sirup can forward for an easel and unwrapped the painting.

"I have called it 'The White Wolf Pack'," he said quietly, as he stood the picture at the proper angle and stepped back.

The boys crowded forward to look.

What they saw was a long ridge rising gently to a higher peak, the night sky blue-black with three stars and a moon which threw a ghostly light into the foreground. Running down the ridge in panicky flight came a small herd of cattle, cows and their calves running close alongside. After them came the wolf pack, pressing hard on the heels of the hindmost calf. The moonlight shone full in their faces and they were grinning in expectation of the feast.

An arresting scene, with an intangible, sinister quality that held the Meadowlark boys silent for a space while they stared.

"Just — wolves," said Lawrie with a faint huskiness in his voice as if the scene stirred him anew while he gazed upon the finished work.

"Yeah — wolves," said big Mark Hanley, squinting at the picture. "Kinda funny ——"

"Yeh," grunted old Jake Biddle, rubbing his stiff leg which a horse had permanently crippled some years before. "You got them wolves off color, Lightfoot. There never was a white wolf pack, and there never will be one. Mebby you don't know that white wolves is freaks, skurcer than hen's teeth. You daub some brindle-gray paint on them wolves, and I'll say she's a good picture."

"No," said Lawrie, his eyes still clinging to the picture that under his skilful fingers had grown from dream to vivid reality, "that's the way I want those wolves to look. They're the white wolf pack, and I can't make anything else of them."

"Yeah, I'll tell you what you can make of 'em, Lightfoot," Bob Leverett began with hypocritical earnestness. "You put mule ears on them wolves and call 'em winter rabbits. Jack rabbits is white in the winter time, but wolves is wolves and you oughta paint 'em like they look."

"I see," said Lawrie coldly, "you don't get my meaning after all."

Frank Gelle thereupon moved a step closer, staring hard at the picture. He looked at the artist, hesitated and gave a short laugh.

"Well, I admit I'm nothing but a darn bonehead, but I can see there's something more to that picture than a pack of white wolves chasin' a bunch of scared cattle. That there wolf in the lead looks kinda human to me. Got a squint in the eyes like — well, like Jerry Martin."

"That's who it is, all right," cried Skookum, the boy whom Lark had stolen and adopted and who ruled the Meadowlark from Maw, up in the house, to old Jake Biddle the choreman. "I know who all of 'em is, 'cause I seen the pitcher he made this one from. All the wolves had men's faces on 'em and I knew every one. And I asked Lightfoot what he done it for that way, and — and he said white wolves is rustlers. And that's what it means."

"The hell it does!" This jolted from Tony Scarpa.

"I thought you said you run acrost this on the way home from Anderson's," Mark Hanley spoke up. "You never run acrost Jerry Martin, 'cause I and him was in Smoky Ford that day."

"That first wolf sure does look like Jerry more and more, as yuh study him," said Frank. Then he shook his head. "But boy, if you put Jerry's

eyes in that wolf's head on purpose, you sure got off wrong, that time. Jerry's as fine a boy as there is in the country. He sure ain't a cow thief, if that's what you're drivin' at."

"Well, since you've guessed the allegory," said Lawrie in a pleased tone, "I'll show you my working sketch of the wolves. You see, I put men's faces on all these wolves in the sketch, and then in drawing them into my big picture I merely kept certain little betraying characteristics. It just happens that Jerry Martin's eyes lend themselves easily to the likeness I wished to convey. All these faces do, for that matter — or, of course, I couldn't have made use of them. I feel very much flattered, Jelly, to think I did it so well that you recognized one of the wolves without any hint from me."

Silence, while the Meadowlark boys stared at the picture. Seeing men of their acquaintance pictured as wolves of the range was a new experience which required some mental adjustment. They were accustomed to the obvious, and this bit of symbolism failed to strike them as anything less than personal and accusative. They needed time to wonder whether these men were rustlers or not.

Skookum pointed a finger toward a certain wolf, the smallest of the lot, whose face showed

rather indistinctly, peering out of the shadows as he ran at the tail of the pack, his body a vague blur in the dark.

"Lookit Billy Prosser! Gee, Bud'll be mad when he sees that one! His girl's brother a white wolf — oh, gee!"

CHAPTER THREE

"COW THIEF'S A HARD NAME TO CALL A MAN"

SOME one swore under his breath.

"I don't believe I'd show that to Bud," Frank Gelle soberly advised. "If you wanted to paint a thing like that, Lightfoot, why didn't you pick on men like old Palmer and the Frying Pan outfit — or put Butch Cassidy's eyes in that first wolf's head? Butch is a wolf, if ever there was one in human form — but not Jerry Martin or Bill Prosser, or none of them boys."

"Darn right," Bob Leverett grunted. "Yuh want to look out, Lightfoot, or your deep symbolical meaning 'll lead somebody to land on yuh with both front feet."

"Idee of showin' up a bunch of rustlers as wolves slinkin' around in the night — that there's all right enough," Gelle said appreciatingly. "As a picture, she's a humdinger. But you want to be careful who you pin the name of wolf on to. Might get into trouble; that's all."

A flush flooded the cheeks of the artist, but his eyes did not falter before his critics.

"Well, I know I'm pretty green about the West," he admitted, though his tone held little

apology. "But I'm not so green about human nature as you seem to think. In learning to make pictures, one learns to use his eyes and to interpret what he sees. You can't paint true pictures of life unless you understand life.

"You fellows want to break away from the narrow, provincial idea that any man who can't ride and rope and brand and shoot the way you do is a congenital idiot. Even a tenderfoot may possibly be able to think, occasionally."

"Meaning, I s'pose, that you may be a smart boy even if yuh don't know straight up from sideways," Mark Hanley deduced with his heavy sarcasm.

"Meaning that I wasn't brought up in a home for the feeble-minded, and that raising cattle and riding horses are merely to be classed as occupational work, and not the sum total of human achievement, as some of you boys seem to think. Mark, you might try painting a picture!"

"I might," drawled Mark, "if I was a little girl and my mamma said I could after I'd put my dollies to sleep."

Lightfoot went white around the mouth, and his eyes had a dangerous sparkle.

"That's very witty, and to a man of your peculiar type of intelligence no doubt the comparison strikes close to the truth. Art may be

an effeminate accomplishment — yet the names of men who have painted pictures that ring true are reverenced to-day, hundreds of years after their death. I have yet to learn of one cow-puncher whose fame will go ringing down the ages! "

"Pitchers that ring true, mebby, but I don't see nothin' true about that there one! You needn't think we're all such boneheads we can't see what you're driving at. Why, I can even git it through my head that rustlers is like wolves, and an allergorical pitcher of a pack of white wolves might stand for cow thieves out rustlin' cattle at night. But where you git off wrong, Lightfoot, is in puttin' the faces of a bunch of nice, decent fellers on them wolves! Walk up to one of them boys an' call 'em cow thieves, an' watch where the lightnin' strikes! "

"Yeah, you got no call to libellize folks that way," Jake Biddle put in censoriously. "Cow thief's a hard name to call a man, Lightfoot. 'Pears to me like the deeper meanin' of that pitcher is that you're goin' to find yourself in the middle of a damn' bad fix, doin' things like that."

"You dassent show that to Lark or Bud," Tony declared with grim foreboding.

"What you better do, Lightfoot, is stick it in the stove before Lark sees it," Bob Leverett ad-

vised. "Lark's poison on runnin' down the neighbors behind their backs."

"How do you know?" Brunelle flashed back at him. "Lark never saw a thing like that before."

"No, an' I shore wouldn't want to be the one to show him — not an' say I done it. Why, you got faces of boys on them wolves that's *friends* of ours! Take Billy Prosser, there! Bud's goin' to marry Bonnie Prosser, an' that makes Billy darn near related to the Meddalark! Take Jim Stevens, there. Ain't a better rope hand in the country. He works for the Meddalark durin' fall and spring round-up. You wanted to have a pack uh human rustler wolves, why 'n hell didn't yuh pick on them that's mebby in the business?"

"And how," asked the artist, "do you know I didn't?"

Bob Leverett choked and glared, and Tony Scarpa took up the dispute.

"Ring Lacey, there; call him a cow thief? Why, he worked fer the Meddalark outfit two years!"

"Which, of course, is the hall-mark of integrity!" Brunelle softly and ironically attested. Then he amended that jibe with quick penitence. "Of course, I see your point of view and I admire the loyalty all you fellows show.

"Put it this way, if you like: In the first place,

I started out to give Marge some idea for a story. She seems to lack the faculty for seeing the dramatic element in anything she's close to, as she is now to the West. Naturally, my mind turned to cattle stealing — which is always good for a story — and when she asked for a title too, I worked up this White Wolf Pack. In thinking over the personnel of the wolf pack, I — just fitted in those fellows."

"Oh, well, if that's all yuh meant by it!" Tony accepted the explanation sourly. "Why didn't you say in the first place it was one of them imaginary blood-and-thunder stories of Marge's?"

"Better not use them boys, just the same," Gelle warned, not altogether satisfied that the explanation did explain. "Better leave real people out of a thing like that. It ain't a nice way to use your neighbors, seems to me."

"The trouble with you fellows is, that once you make up your minds a fellow is right, you never pay any further attention to what he does or says. You've branded him a good fellow — it reminds me of your cattle branding. Good or bad, once the brand is on, you think that settles it.

"Well, it doesn't, and you'd know it if you'd stop to think a minute. A man may be honest to-day, and this time next year he may head a gang of train robbers. Character is not immu-

table. Men change; for better or worse, according to their bent and environment. I'm not saying these fellows are rustlers, but on the other hand, I couldn't swear they're not. Neither could you, if you'd lay aside that habit of loyalty and get right down to what you actually know about them."

"Bonnie Prosser's brother ain't a rustler!" Skookum fiercely denied the implication. "He's my friend and he made me a quirt!"

"That's right, Skookum, you stand up for your friends!" Tony praised him, patting him on the shoulder.

"Ain't none of 'em rustlers," Mark Hanley made the sweeping statement. "Lightfoot might just as well put us fellers' faces on them wolves. Be just as much sense to it."

"Only, he knowed what'd happen if he done a thing like that," Bob growled. "You better throw that thing in the fire, Lightfoot, before somebody else sees it. An' yuh better tell Marge ——"

It was at this moment that young Bud Larkin literally blew in among them.

Now Bud Larkin, college taught for two years, range-bred for twenty; nephew of the Meadowlark's owner and himself owner of a thousand head or so of cattle and perhaps two score of horses, might properly be expected to feel a pe-

culiar interest in cattle thieves, real or symbolical. Moreover, it was Bud who had impulsively brought Lawrie Brunelle and his sister Marge to the Meadowlark, when their financial resources had been temporarily wiped out with the bank funds in a daring daylight robbery, and it had looked to Bud as if the two were likely to starve unless some one stepped forward and played providence.

Bud's sense of hospitality went deeper than some. He had brought the two out to Meadowlark Basin, created a place for the young artist on the payroll, and prevailed upon Skookum to accept a few hours of school as a part of his day's routine, with Marge Brunelle for the teacher.

Even after the bank's funds were recovered and their bank account restored to them, the two Brunelles had stayed on in the place that had come to seem like home. It had not occurred to any one, and to them least of all, that they were now free to leave their sanctuary. In the easy-going way of the West, these strangers had become home folks; almost members of the family. It was Bud who had made them so, Bud who had nicknamed the artist Lightfoot for his dancing, who was expected now to pass judgment on the artistic crime just committed against his neighbors.

With one accord, the critics stepped back and gave him a clear view of the wolf painting and of the incriminating pencil sketch propped against a bowl of Maw's wild chokecherry jam. They glanced at Lightfoot, standing with his arms folded in an unconsciously theatrical pose, waiting for the outcome.

Bud stopped short to glance inquiringly from one to another, spied the pictures and stepped forward. He looked questioningly at Lawrie, studied the working sketch more attentively, then pushed back his hat and gave a puzzled laugh. But while the Meadowlark boys waited for the storm to break, he turned away.

"I came down to bring the glad tidings that the Frying Pan is going to give a dance next Saturday night," he said. "Lark says we can all go if we want to, and he'll drive over with Maw and Marge. If this wind drops, that is. Been blowing three days now, so it ought to blow itself out by then. She sure is a fright, up on the bench between here and Landusky."

For once, the news of a dance stirred no enthusiastic clamor.

"Yeah, sure, we'll go," Gelle said absently. And Tony Scarpa, true to his nature and lack of training, broached the subject in all their minds.

"What d' yuh think of them wolves, Bud?"

"A work of art, I'd say. Did you boys do any rough riding to-day, or was it too windy?"

"Yeah. Say, Bud, don't yuh think Lightfoot's got a right to burn a thing like that — makin' out Jerry Martin an' Billy Prosser an' Ring Lacey is rustlin' calves? That's what he's aimin' at, in them two pitchers. Calls 'em white wolves, an' it's a damn' dirty lie. I don't care if forty Lightfoots said it."

"You'll prove it's a lie, or I'll give you a thrashing!" Lightfoot sprang toward him, clawing at his shirt sleeves to get them up.

"Oh, will yuh!" Tony snapped into action, landing a blow on the artist's jaw.

Before Lawrie could swing, Bud grabbed him and hurled him away. Gelle had Tony's arms pinned from behind.

"Fine thing to fight about, I must say!" Bud snorted. "Cut it out, you fellows. Lightfoot's pictures don't mean anything personal — you ought to know that much about art, anyway. He'd draw in faces that appealed to his imagination, regardless of who owned them. Why, you darned mutts, I posed for him myself, a while back, when he wanted a picture of a killer standing behind a rock waiting to get in a shot from ambush! With my hat pulled down and my lip lifted in a mean snarl, Lightfoot said I was just

the type he wanted. He never showed the picture because Marge didn't like his background, and he got mad and tore it up.

"You fellows make me sick, you're so damned literal. You've got about as much imagination as a bunch of mules; you kick at everything you're not used to. If Lightfoot means that for an artistic rustler picture, I'll say it's a dandy. He can put my face on a wolf any time his artistic soul craves to do so."

"Yeah, but he *means* it!" Tony persisted. "It ain't the picture so much; it's the meaning he puts to it. You ask him yourself, Bud."

Bud started to laugh, glancing at Lawrie.

"That's not true, is it, Lightfoot? You don't think those boys *are* cow thieves?"

"What if I did? Can you prove they're not?"

The laugh left Bud's face as if he had been struck. He gave Brunelle a sharp look.

"Say, Lightfoot, you're crazy — or a damn' fool."

CHAPTER FOUR

NOTHING TO DO BUT GO

MARGE BRUNELLE, younger than her brother but prone to overlook that fact and to assume the leadership as hers by right, was speaking her mind with sisterly frankness. It was, of course, her mind as it reacted to The White Wolf Pack, since almost overnight the picture had assumed the proportions of an issue upon which the entire Meadowlark outfit stood solidly against the artist, who was growing exceedingly tight-lipped and hard-eyed over the affair.

"I don't see why you want to be so stubborn and mean about it, Lawrie," Marge said for the third time since breakfast. "I never intimated that I wanted a plot like that. Those boys you've used for the wolves aren't at all the type for rustlers and outlaws, and anyway, I want a love story, with a girl from the East who gets into some sort of mix-up with outlaws and is rescued by the hero. That's the kind of story the editors want."

"You mean, it's the kind of story they always get," Lawrie corrected with a brotherly sneer. "If that's the kind of slush you meant to write,

why under heaven didn't you stay back home and do it?"

"Because I wanted my local color to be authentic, and you know it as well as I do."

"Well, I'm preserving the authenticity, am I not?"

"No! Not if you mean these plots about messing around a little fire, burning marks on bawling calves," Marge retorted with the sisterly contempt which matched his sneer. "The mere fact that they're not your calves, and you're putting on the wrong mark, doesn't make it romantic or even picturesque. I've watched the boys do it, and it's just dirty and smelly and disagreeable. I can't make a story out of such stuff, and you know I can't. There isn't a single girl in your libelous picture."

"I don't know why that matters. Stuff that's paintable is also writable — in competent hands. There's real drama there — and it's no place for a girl, anyway."

"A lot you know about it! All under heaven you've done, Lawrie Brunelle, is paint a picture that has got the boys all down on you."

"That's the fault of their narrow-mindedness; not the fault of the picture."

"Bud isn't narrow-minded, nor Lark; and they won't speak to you scarcely. I'm sure I don't

blame them, either. They're quite right about it."

"And for that reason I'm going to leave here. I'll go where I can paint without being censored by a lot of bigoted louts. We'll find some place ——"

"You mean *you* will, if you're silly enough to go. I'm not going to leave here, Lawrie, and you may as well know it first as last. Why can't you settle down and make some sort of apology to the boys and burn that thing? It's positively insulting to those fellows you drew in. I don't blame the boys one bit for being furious."

"Oh, you don't!"

"No, I don't! And you needn't talk in that lofty tone about leaving, when you know you won't do anything of the kind. We've both got too good positions here."

"Charity positions in the first place," Lawrie pointed out bluntly. "Bud invented both, when he found us stranded in Smoky Ford. You a school-teacher — with one pupil, and not even sure he'll turn up to be taught! How many mornings do you go down to draw your 'student body' out of the corral — and how often do you fail to get him? I'd be ashamed to call it a school, if I were you. And my job isn't much better, I'm ashamed to say. We should have gone

long ago, as soon as the bank could pay our money back." Brothers can be candid at times, even brothers who are artists.

"Well, so long as they want me to teach Skookum, there's nothing to be ashamed of in staying. I'm ready to teach him, and it's their business to see that he comes to be taught. It gives me time for my writing, anyway."

"Oh, your writing!"

"Yes, and my writing is quite as important as your painting, Lawrie Brunelle! Though of course I don't go around insulting people with my stories——"

"No, you merely make them laugh behind your back."

"I wouldn't actually lie, if I were you, Lawrie; not even to be mean."

"It isn't necessary. The truth is sufficiently painful. Furthermore, I'm not going to apologize and say I didn't really mean that picture. I do mean it. There's a lot of rustling going on, and I've as much right to guess at who's doing it as any one has. They've got to prove I've guessed wrong, before I paint out a single face."

"You'd better paint out all the faces," Marge warned him, "if you mean to hold your job."

Lawrie made a gesture of extreme disgust.

"I'm through with my job, I tell you! I'm

leaving to-day. You can do as you please, of course, but if you stay here, you'll show you're siding with the enemy, against your own brother!"

"When my own brother acts like an idiot," said Marge, "I can't very well side with him."

Lawrie left it at that, turning on his heel and walking very fast down the path. He did not really believe that Marge would let him leave the Meadowlark alone, in spite of all she had said. Had their positions been reversed, and some story of hers had roused the clannish antagonism of the Meadowlark, he would have stood by her; at least in public.

Her flat refusal to leave with him filled him with amazed resentment. It was not the necessity of earning the few dollars Lark paid for teaching Skookum that held her, he knew. With five thousand dollars in the bank which they could draw upon whenever they chose, staying with their jobs was a thin excuse, he thought.

As he neared the corral where the boys were busy breaking horses, Lark met him, scowled and passed on without a word. Lawrie's eyes snapped. Two steps, and he wheeled and called Lark's name.

"I just thought I'd tell you I'm leaving," he said stiffly. "I'd like to buy a couple of horses,

one to ride and one for a pack horse, if you have them to spare."

"What horses do you think you want?" Lark asked coolly, without showing the surprise Lawrie had half expected.

"Well, that bay I've been riding suits me all right, for a saddle horse. I'll have to let you choose the pack horse, I'm afraid."

Lark squinted at him, lifted his hat, rumpled his hair and set the hat back at a different angle, —a habit which caused Lawrie a premonitory pang of homesickness.

"There's that mouse-colored mule that runs with the bay," Lark said, after a minute of study. "You can have the two for eighty dollars. The mule's a good packer, and they'll stick together."

Not a word to show that he was interested in "Lightfoot's" plans, nor a hint that he had better stay where he was, Lawrie noticed bitterly. It was not like Lark, and it showed, more than recrimination would have done, just how much antagonism had been raised by that wretched wolf picture.

"Will you trust me for the amount while I can get in to the bank and bring the money back?" Lawrie asked him, after a pause which threatened to become awkward.

Lark squinted, rumpled his hair again and

dropped his cigarette stub in the path, grinding it under his boot heel to put out the fire.

"I owe you ninety dollars for work," he said laconically. "You had a hundred and twenty coming to you, and I'm charging you thirty dollars for that saddle and bridle and spurs you bought of me. You'll want a packsaddle and a bed roll, I s'pose, so by the time you're ready to drift we'll be square. That all right?"

"Yes, only I realize that I haven't been worth my salt here," Lawrie told him brusquely, consciously keeping his voice cold in spite of his longing to tell Lark how sorry he was.

"Call it a deal then. Any little grub you want, I'll throw that in free gratis; enough to see you in the clear till you can stock up."

"I don't want anything I can't pay for," Lawrie said, his hurt making him unintentionally surly. "I intended to bring the cash for the horses, soon as possible."

But Lark was already walking on to the house, and if he heard he gave no sign.

Lawrie stood looking after him for a moment, then went on to the saddle-horse corral, caught the little bay without too much awkwardness, and was saddling him morosely when Tony Scarpa and Mark Hanley came by. Tony laughed.

"Lightfoot's goin' out huntin' white wolves,"

he called derisively. "Yuh want to look out, Lightfoot! White wolves' bites is shore death. You'll ketch hydrophoby, shore as yuh live, if you go monkeying around them varmints," chortled Mark.

"Make a better wolfer than what he does an artist," Tony fleered.

"And that ain't sayin' such a hell of a lot, either," Mark gravely enlarged the statement.

"Little Red Ridin' Hood 'll be hollerin' for gran'maw to come pull their teeth for 'im," Tony jeered. "I'll betcha——"

"Get down off your horse, Tony, and I'll finish what you started last night," Lawrie grimly challenged, unhooking the stirrup from the saddle horn and leading the bay to the fence where he tied him.

"I've stood all the hazing you smart boys felt like giving me, and I've been the butt of your silly jokes from the time I've landed. That's all right, and part of the game. I've nothing to say about that. But for a long time, Tony, I've wanted to smack you on that big mouth of yours, and now before I leave I'm going to indulge myself in the pleasure of licking you till you howl. Get down off that horse — unless you're coward as well as a big-mouthed blowhard."

"Coward? Me? Say, you damned paint

slinger, I won't do a thing but take you all to pieces! We'll shore find out what makes yuh go 'fore I'm done!"

Horse-breaking in the other corral was suspended while the boys came running. Before the swiftest reached the spot, the loud smack of a blow told that the fight was on — and a pretty evenly matched battle it promised to be.

Most of the boys climbed eagerly to the top of the corral where they immediately hooked heels under lower rails and began to yell advice and encouragement at the top of their voices. Bud, last on the scene, darted in and attempted to pull Tony off Lawrie, who he thought was getting the worse of it, and Lightfoot swung a vicious blow that sent Bud staggering.

"Keep out!" Lawrie panted. "I've been aching — to get a fall — out of this — lop-eared — blatherskite — for weeks!" He grunted then as Tony landed on his middle, and after that the ringside enthusiasts did all the talking.

"You damn' fool, he can kill you for all I care!" Bud snarled, backing off with his handkerchief to his nose. "And if Tony don't lick you, I will."

"Yeah-h boy, Tony will!" yelled that individual, exulting prematurely, since he went down almost before he spoke. But he was up again

and at it, and the boys on the corral fence urged him on.

They were still hammering away when Lark arrived. Seeing him, the audience hitched themselves uneasily to new positions, jerking sly thumbs toward their boss, grumbling to one another that now the fun was spoiled. Bud, still dabbing soppily at his nose with a reddened handkerchief, shot him a saturnine glance from under his hat brim and mentally wished him joy of the job of stopping those two.

But Lark made no attempt to stop them. He stood with his thumbs hooked inside his belt and his hat tilted over his nose, watching the fight.

Guns had always been Lark's fighting tools, as they had been his father's, old Bill Larkin, who had founded the Meadowlark ranch and branded the first Meadowlark cattle, fought his way to prosperity in a country given overmuch to fighting, and who had gone out fighting and now at last slept in peace under the cottonwood grove at the head of the upper meadow down by the river.

Son of such a father, Lark sometimes admitted that he did not "go much on fist fightin'; it never ended nothin'." Lark evidently did not believe in letting a foe live to fight another day, though he did not put it just like that, and his expression

now denoted an impatient tolerance of the whole proceeding. It was not the way he would settle an argument, but he was willing to let others choose their own method.

Lawrie Brunelle was a scrapper, they had to admit before it was over. For an artist and a tenderfoot he held his own better than any man there expected, but he did not whip Tony. The two were weaving uncertainly on their feet and staggering into ineffective clinches and lunging blows that went wild more often than they landed, when Marge flew indignantly into the battle ground and caught a handful of hair in each head at that moment close together in one of their unaffectionate embraces.

"Leggo!" yowled Tony, whose scalp was sensitive.

"Get outa here!" panted her brother, trying to shake her loose, as he felt his head pulled inexorably back upon his shoulders.

"I'll do nothing of the kind! Lawrie, you stop! I never saw anything so disgraceful in my life!"

"It'll do for you to write into a story," Jack Rosen yelled at her gleefully. "Let 'em alone, Marge! They'll be layin' down kickin' at each other in five more minutes. Boy, they shore kin fight longer'n two gazabos I ever seen!"

"Buddy and Lark, whatever possessed you two, lettin' them pound each other into mince meat?"

Bud, still trying to staunch the red trickle from his bruised nose, gave Marge a reproachful look and walked away. One by one the boys slid down from the corral fence and sneaked back to their horse-breaking. Tony made for the bunk house after a whole shirt and to administer first aid, and Lawrie went weaving over to his horse, the angry expostulations of his sister following him as he mounted and rode away after his mule.

Not a word did he speak to any one while he packed the mule and made ready to go. Bud, who ordinarily would have tried to talk him from his purpose, was still resentful of that blow on the nose and kept his distance; while Lark, whose wise good humor was a tradition with the Meadowlark, chose to remain coldly neutral. As for the boys, they would stand together, let the blame lie where it would.

So, without a good-by or a friendly wave of the hand, Lawrence Brunelle, artist, rode down the edge of the meadow and up through the narrow, rocky pass to the benchland that rimmed the basin, and never once looked back.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MEADOWLARK SITS IN JUDGMENT

"LET him go," Lark said in an argumentative tone, as Maw and Marge turned teary-eyed from watching the young recalcitrant ride out of sight into the steep, rocky pass. "If he's goin' to stay in this country and learn to make a hand, he's got to get out for himself and take a few hard knocks like the rest of the folks.

"Different with a girl," he added, his kindly hazel eyes turning toward Marge. "A girl's place ain't larry-whoopin' over the country, anyway. Marge couldn't go with him — her place is right here where she's at. But Lightfoot's got to learn a few things."

"You didn't need to let him go off and start in learnin' 'em all bunged up and bloody from fightin'," Maw contended brokenly, taking it for granted that both fighters were bruised and battered almost beyond recognition. "No picture in the world is worth fightin' over like that. I'm su'prised at you, Larkie. That poor boy ain't no more fit to go off alone than a baby. I wouldn't feel no worse if it was Skookum ridin' off by himself, nobody knows where."

At that, Marge fled to her room where she might weep in secret over the hard fate of her erring brother, and Maw waddled after her, grief twisting her goblin features into strange grimaces that made her more gnomelike than ever.

Down in the corral the boys also were discussing Lightfoot's general helplessness once he got out away from the Meadowlark and among strangers. Even Bud, usually more restrained in his speech tha the others and owning a keener sense of loyalty to his friends, was jolted out of his habitual reticence.

"Ignorant of the West as Marge is, she's more capable of making it alone than Lightfoot, if you want my opinion," he said, caressing his nose with gentle finger tips. "Why, do you know how I first ran across Lightfoot? Talk about tenderfeet! He was sitting in the Elkhorn, sketching faces in the crowd there — the day the bank was robbed and Charlie Mulholland was killed, you know. Steve Godfrey was on a bender and had a bunch around him, and he wanted Lightfoot to drink. He said he didn't care for any, thank you, and Steve decided to make him dance. Maybe I told you, though I think not.

"Steve was going to shoot at his feet — the old gag. Lightfoot said he was willing to dance if he had some music other than a six-gun. His

objection was that Steve couldn't keep time with the shots, and it would break into the dancing while he stopped to reload! Can you beat that? So I offered to play the mouth-harp for him, and he danced as long as I would play.

"The point is this: Afterwards, he told me that he did it so as to get better acquainted with the saloon crowd. He said he was anxious to make friends with Smoky Ford — and this was after he'd been there a week and had every chance in the world to size those fellows up. He took it for granted those booze fighters were typical of the West, and he was anxious to have them accept him as one of their crowd.

"That's the trouble with Lightfoot, and it's the thing that got him in trouble with that wolf picture. He means all right, but he lacks discrimination."

"Well, I know he shore lacks *something*," Bob Leverette emphatically agreed. "Mebby it's discrimination — if that's as bad as it sounds."

"Bad enough to keep him in hot water if he doesn't learn sense," Bud predicted sententiously.

"Wonder what he aims to do, out in this cold world all alone by himself," Rosen speculated. "He'll git lost, or a snake 'll bite him or something. Where's he headed for, Bud? You know?"

"No," said Bud, "I don't know where he's

headed for, but I can tell you where he'll land, and that's in trouble."

To that opinion there was no dissent, though the boys continued to talk of Lightfoot off and on all day and well into the evening, dissecting his virtues and making them seem like faults, after the manner of angry folk the world over who seek to justify their own attitude by painting the other fellow blacker.

"He shore will land in trouble if Ring Lacey or Jerry ever gits to hear about him callin' 'em rustlers," Mark Hanley declared. "I got a good mind to ride over right now and put 'em wise. You can't tell what a damn fool like him is liable to do."

"Oh, Lightfoot doesn't mean any harm," Bud half-heartedly defended Lawrie. "You fellows made him sore, and he flew off the handle, but I still don't think he really believes he's found out who it is that's stealing our cattle."

"An' that's where you're wrong," Mark insisted. "Why, he told us he'd run acrost 'em when he was comin' over from Anderson's — didn't he, boys? Ain't that what he said, b'fore Bud come into the chuck house las' night? He said he'd painted a pitcher that had a deep meanin', and it was somethin' he seen on the way home from Anderson's. What's more, I rec'onized that

ridge he put in. It's that one runnin' along this side of Coyote Pass, right about where that row of big pines is, goin' up from the trail.

"What I want t' know is, what was Lightfoot doin' up on that ridge? That shore ain't the trail home from Anderson's — it ain't even a short cut. He had to quit the trail and ride a mile out of his way, an' up hill at that! What's he snoopin' around up there for?"

"Lightfoot's an artist, you must remember. You can't tell what them pelicans is liable to do or where they're liable to go," Frank Gelle put in, mildly remorseful over the quarrel. "He never said he seen Ring or Jerry or Billy Prosser up there, Mark."

"He just as good as said it," cried Mark. "He said he put them into the form of wolves because they fit. You heard him yourself, Jelly. The damn pinhead claims he knows all about human nature! Haw-haw-haw!"

"He's heard talk about huntin' down the cow thieves," Rosy observed, "and he thinks he can maybe pick 'em out by the color of their eyes. Jerry *has* got squinty eyes, all right — but, hell! That don't make a cow thief outa him, nor a wolf, neither."

"Yeah, and what about Billy Prosser?" asked Tony, who returned just then to the corral, look-

ing as if he had been fighting wildcats. "Billy's a darn good kid, if he ain't real purty to look at."

"He isn't homely," Bud denied quickly.

"No, he ain't homely, even if his nose *is* long and his eyes sets kinda tight together. Lightfoot picked on him for a rustler——"

"Simply because of that long nose," Bud retaliated. "I can't recall that Lightfoot said Billy was a thief." He threw down his cigarette stub and set his heel upon it to grind out the spark of fire that remained, pulled his hat down upon his head and picked up his rope.

"Oh, let's leave Lightfoot alone," he advised. "We talk like a bunch of old women. If he's gone out to hunt rustlers all by his lonely, as some of you seem to think, I hope he's lucky enough to locate them before they get wise to him. If he does, he'll do a darn sight more than any of the rest of us have been able to do."

"He shore ain't goin' to locate 'em by snoopin' around fellers like Ring and Jerry Martin an' Jim Stevens," Mark Hanley reiterated, clinging to the subject as small minds always do. "I've saw places where a feller 'd be shot on sight fer doin' what he done. An' if this country wasn't gittin' so damn' tamed down, that's what 'd happen to 'im, too! Why, any one of them boys would kill 'im if they ever seen that there pitcher."

"Oh, shut up, Mark!" Frank Gelle sharply advised him. "You act like your own toes had been stepped on. Them boys can fight their own battles."

"Yeah, you're darn right they can!" Mark retorted. "An' you can bet they will, too!" But he took the hint and let the subject alone after that, and the horse-breaking resumed its dust-raising commotion in the big corral.

CHAPTER SIX

ON THE TRAIL OF ROMANCE

BUT Lawrie had no intention of starting out to hunt rustlers. A curious sense of defiant freedom began to take possession of him, as if he had escaped from some irksome restraint and were riding straight into the land of Romance, which was the West he had hoped to find.

Now he seemed to understand why the West had so far failed to give him more than fleeting glimpses of that glamorous, wildly picturesque quality which the artist soul of him had craved. He had come too close to the matter-of-fact, everyday business of living, and had found that even in the wilderness life may be a prosaic round of commonplace things. He had come West to find adventure and inspiration to paint wonderful pictures, and he had been put to mending pasture fences and running errands to other ranches.

So it happened that familiarity had dulled the magic lights which only distance can lend to a scene, however beautiful. Lawrie likened it to toiling across a desert to reach the mountain of enchantment, all purple shadows and softly glow-

ing crests lifting golden peaks to the sun, and finding that the purple shadows have given place to rocky ravines, and the smiling golden heights are nothing more than stony slopes too steep for climbing.

At first sight Meadowlark Basin had seemed picturesque in the extreme; a glamorous bit of the West he had dreamed of finding. Bud Larkin himself was the perfect type of young cowboy, gallant hero of any romance one might weave around him. Bud's Uncle Lark, though older and quieter, was another, with his soft drawling voice, his kindly hazel eyes and the deadly quality of fighter beneath a gently tolerant surface. Bob, Tony, Mark, Rosy and Jelly, even old Jake Biddle fitted admirably into his earlier pictures.

The ranch, the horses, the dashing here and there; ropes hissing, spur chains jingling faintly — a sick feeling as of some great loss made him bite his underlip as he thought of that first month or so at the Meadowlark, when he had thrilled to each sight, to every sound of ranch work. The laughing banter of the boys had tingled pleasurably through his nerves and brought a responsive leap into his pulse.

Those had been days of enchantment. His fingers had trembled with eagerness to catch the glamor and transfer all the tangy flavor to sketch-

book and canvas in the moments snatched from the fascination of his small part in the life that went on in the Basin.

Just when the commonplace element had crept in he did not know. Perhaps it was Marge's complaint about the dearth of dramatic action that had first dulled the magic glow which gave to this new life the rosy tints of romance. Perhaps it was the matter-of-fact acceptance by every one of the bizarre nature of most happenings there, which began insensibly to modify his own reactions to colorful incidents, and sent his imagination questing over the sky line for that elusive thing, Romance, which had somehow fled the Basin.

With Marge it had been different. From the first, her reactions had been commonplace; which was strange, since Marge was firmly convinced that the flair of creative writing was hers, and that some day she would become famous. From the very first Marge had seen the dust and dirt, smelled the acrid stench of burning hair and hide at the few brandings she had witnessed. The cowboys, whose picturesque, devil-may-care grace had stirred Lawrie's imagination beyond words, to Marge's critical eyes needed haircuts and considerable training in grammar and deportment. The ease with which they swung into the saddle

on a restless horse brought a tightness into Lawrie's throat; but Marge noted only their failure to remove their hats in her presence and to rise when she entered the room.

Curiously, though, Marge had accustomed herself to the little crudities of the Meadowlark boys as insensibly as Lawrie had lost the glamor of perspective. She had learned to laugh at the stale jokes and obvious repartee that had come to bore Lawrie to petulance. Marge had grown to like the Meadowlark boys — Jelly with a special, romantic kind of liking, Lawrie suspected. On the other hand, he had grown tired of them all.

Riding along the trail to Smoky Ford where he meant to outfit for wanderings farther afield, Lawrie meditated upon these things and wondered if the fault lay all with himself. He was almost convinced that it did, but nevertheless he knew that, whatever the fault, he was glad to be riding away from the Meadowlark, glad not to know just where he was going or what he meant to do when he got there. It was not the West that had palled, but the petty irritations of having to live in such close relations with persons who were content with trivial things; who never thought beneath the everyday surface of life.

To be alone somewhere, where he could paint

when he pleased and be free from inane comments and ignorant criticisms — that was an old, old dream that had grown up with Lawrie Brunelle, changing as conditions changed, but only in detail fit new environments and new views of life. Always his day-dreams remained fundamentally the same: To live alone somewhere amid picturesquely beautiful surroundings, free to paint when he pleased and how he pleased. To win the approbation of others if possible; to sell if he could — but in any case to paint.

As his horse stepped off the miles that carried him farther and farther from the Meadowlark, Lawrie began to dream the old dreams; to play with the idea, just as he had played in wistful make-believe ever since he could remember.

As a child, it had been the hayloft where he hid to paint the view of the river and the woods beyond, daubing raw greens and blues on smooth bits of board, trying to reproduce scenic beauties as seen through the square opening in the gable. Later, in school, he had dreamed of a big, bare studio loft somewhere high up in a city where he could look over the rooftops and paint as he dreamed.

When Marge took the writing fever, his air castle adapted itself to her potential needs and he dreamed of illustrating her stories, so that to-

gether they would receive the plaudits of a fast-growing public following. When her ambitions concentrated upon the West, his dreams followed dutifully her bent, and he had come to Montana willingly enough, for after all his dream was built of the stuff within his own soul, and mere environment did not count so much, since he drew from the fount within.

Well, he had made pictures out here, and Marge had written a story or two; but in his heart he believed that his pictures were much better than Marge's stories. The only good points about her wild-west fiction, he thought now in his mood of utter candor, were the typing and the grammar; yes, and the spelling — just to give her a full measure of credit. But her characters were stiff and grandiloquent, her incidents impossible and her descriptions copy-book stuff. He knew it, and he knew that it had been a sheer waste of time, doing pictures for stories that never would sell; pictures which never pleased her, though the puerile narratives did; which always fell short of her desires, though the worst of her stories were precious in her eyes, so that she refused to see a flaw or change a word.

Poor Marge! But she would marry somebody — Jelly, maybe — and be content. In any case she was in good hands; much better hands

than his. For himself, at last he was free to go where he pleased, do what he pleased. It was the first time in his life that Lawrence Brunelle could truthfully say that and mean it literally.

Jogging along the empty trail, he began to wonder just how he should set about doing the thing he was now free to do. It was all rather vague, with details blurred in the mist of his dreams of sunsets and dawns and of cattle plodding single file down a steep trail to a water hole.

Before he had gone another mile that picture grew sharper in his fancy, until he could see each bush and stone, could vision the reflection in the water of the weeds that grew upon the bank.

So, dreaming along, the practical man of affairs who would lay careful plans for his future was lost in the artist entranced with the picture he would paint when next he set up a canvas and laid out his tubes of pigment.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LAWRIE LEARNS ABOUT LONELINESS

THE little bay horse which Lawrie called Jasper because of his color jogged tirelessly along through the hazy sunshine which had followed the howling wind; a sporadic day of Indian summer set tantalizingly at the end of August, as if the land were drowsing in languid comfort after the past three days of terrific buffeting.

Smoky distances lulled the artist soul of Lawrie. The muffled clup-clup of the mouse-colored mule following in the dust flung up by Jasper's shuffling heels beat soporifically upon his senses, drugging him to languorous meditations. He forgot that his cheek bone was skinned, forgot his fight with Tony and the cause of that impromptu battle. For the time being he had no past and the future floated impalpably before him somewhere in the golden haze that veiled the hills toward which he rode at ease, steeped in placid revery.

It was Jasper, turning his head to stare at a hillside, that woke him from his trancelike meditations; and the mule coming along behind suddenly broke out in a long raucous braying. The

shock of those awful corrugations of sound just behind him shattered for good the tranquillity of Lawrie's mood. He started, looked around and saw a rider come angling down the slope that marked the final foothills of the Indian reservation to the east of the Smoky Ford trail.

An effective picture the stranger made, his body slanting backward, one gloved hand resting negligently on the cantle, reins held high in the other as he let the dun-colored horse pick his own way down the steep incline.

Lawrie noted the clean angles of the figure, the unconsciously impudent tilt of his gray range hat silhouetted against the coppery glint of the sky just beyond the hill. Pictures, pictures — whichever way he turned his eyes rested upon something which he called "paintable." The West was full of pictures, he thought half impatiently, as the rider approached. All he needed was the leisure and skill to put them on canvas.

The man swung into the trail a few yards ahead of Lawrie, then waited until he came up. A nod and one long, searching glance — the typical salutation when strangers meet in the open.

"Guess we're going the same way," he offered, by way of a friendly overture. "I was beginning to think I had the whole country to myself. If you'd put as much trail behind you since sunup

as I have, you'd know it gets darned monotonous riding all day by your lonesome."

"I've had a couple of hours of it, is all," Lawrie told him, willing to be amiable. "I came from the Meadowlark. Brunelle is my name — the boys call me Lightfoot."

"Mine's Gale Stilson. I'm from away over to hell-and-beyond, down in the middle of the Missouri River. Live on Scow Island with a little bunch of cattle. Got to talking to myself, the other day; caught myself in the act. So I turned the pigs and chickens loose and let the calf in with the milk cow, and I'm going where there's humans to talk to."

"You mean you are going to sell out?" Lawrie was merely following the conversational lead, without feeling at all curious.

"Well, I dunno about that. I would, if I could find anybody fool enough to buy, I guess. No, I'm just staking myself to a little vacation. Got enough hay up to feed my saddle horses, and the cattle always rustle for themselves. Good feed down in there, I'll say that much. No, I thought I'd ride up to Chinook and hang around a while, and maybe jump on a train and go on down to Great Falls. That's about the extent of my pile, or I'd go farther and stay longer. Can't get any action in a real city unless you've got money to

spend, and money ain't my long suit. Been trying to build me up a herd. Sink every extra dollar I get hold of in heifers. They'll pay for my vacations after a while, if nothing happens."

Lawrie looked at him with quickened interest.

"I believe that's a wise idea," he said. "Getting a piece of land somewhere and building up a little herd of cattle, I mean. That wouldn't be such a bad plan for a young fellow like me, would it? It shouldn't be long before a man's fairly independent."

Here, he thought, was the plan for which he had been groping in a fog of conjecture; the plan that would enable him to paint pictures to suit himself, and in the meantime be working slowly but surely toward economic independence.

"That's the way ninety per cent. of the cattle barons got their start," Gale Stilson affirmed. "Most of them rode with a long rope, too, and their herds doubled overnight, some of them!" He laughed and helped himself to a chew of tobacco. "But it ain't so bad, either, to wait for the natural increase without boosting your calf crop at a branding fire. Takes patience, but with luck a fellow can't lose. Only trouble is, it's so darn lonesome."

"Aren't you troubled with rustlers?" Lawrie's thoughts flashed to the little herd of cattle driven

into the black canyon, and to his much maligned picture of the white wolf pack.

"Never lost a hoof that way, so far. Scow Island ain't so easy to get onto, unless you know the ford or have a boat handy. Rustlers work at night, mostly, except maybe glomming a calf or two when they get a chance. Unless it's quite a bunch of stock they're after, they won't take any chances swimming the old Missouri. I've got a boat, but when I'm off the island I hide it so nobody 'd ever find it. I know the ford, too, like a book. It don't bother me none to get back and forth, but no rope artist is going to bother the island as long as there's plenty of stock running on the mainland."

"That sounds pretty safe for a man who can't afford to lose," Lawrie commented wistfully. "I believe I'd like to own an island, myself."

"No, you wouldn't," Stilson told him decisively. "It's lonesomer than hell. Take it on the mainland, folks ride along now and then and stop for a meal; or all night, maybe. You get lonesome, but you never know what minute somebody 'll come riding up. You've got the *feel* of folks riding around through the country. You saddle up and go poking around in the hills, and you may run across somebody, like meeting you here in the trail to-day.

"But take it on the island, you know darned well you've got it all to yourself, except for the stock. Nobody's going to ride up to the door and holler 'Hello'; they can't, without swimming the river. Sure makes a difference, take it month in and month out."

"Then why don't you move over on the mainland?"

"Wel-l," Stilson considered the point, "after you live on a place about so long, you get a lot of plunder around you that ain't hardly movable; not by boat, anyway. Stuff that ain't worth much, but it's handy to have, and it takes time to collect it.

"I've got a nice place, and I've got things handy around the house. Plenty of time to putter around and fix up. If I could just take a pinch bar and move the island over to where she could be anchored to shore," he added whimsically, "I wouldn't ask for nothing better. Seeing I can't do that, I've just got to tough it out, I guess, till I get a little stake."

"You ought to get married," Lawrie suggested, laughing a bit at the other's plight.

"Hell, I'd have to hate a woman pretty bad, to ask her to live on that island!" Stilson snorted. "And if I did, I'd likely go push her off the bank some day. No, it ain't no place for a woman.

Bad enough for a man that ain't got any feelings."

So they talked, drifting away from Scow Island to other matters pertaining to the cattle range, but always drifting back again whenever Stilson had the conversation. For just as a homing pigeon circles and flies straight to his own cote when liberated in strange surroundings, so does a man of narrow experience with life turn to personal reminiscence when he seeks to interest a listener. Stilson had one theme, and that was the loneliness of Scow Island.

Lawrie's reactions were inevitable. He listened enthralled with the word picture of perfect seclusion from interruptions which Gale Stilson unwittingly painted for him when he attempted to put his loneliness vividly into speech. Sympathy was what Stilson wanted, but all he got from Lawrie was envy.

Now Lawrie knew that he never would be content until he himself was "holding down a little place" and building up a herd that would carry his own brand. Long before Smoky Ford was reached he was questioning Stilson deliberately, seeking information for his own use later on.

Among other things, he learned that Stilson had started three years ago with nineteen cows, six two-year-old heifers and a grade Hereford bull,

and that he now owned over sixty head of "she stock" and had sold fifteen head of three-year-old steers to a stockman near Landusky, who would ship them with his own and turn a few dollars' profit on the deal. Next year, he said, he would have more. It was with the proceeds of this sale that he meant to take his modest vacation, and he expected to save enough of the money to buy his winter's supply of grub.

"I don't have to count on feeding a lot of fellows that ride grub-line all winter," he enlarged upon that detail, referring to cowpunchers out of a job who spent the months between round-ups riding from ranch to ranch, "visiting" for a day or a week or a month.

"Don't cost so much to live, down in there; though I wouldn't mind feeding one of them chuck-line riders off and on, just for the company. But they stick to the mainland. They could cross over on the ice in the winter, but it's off the trail, and I guess I ain't got much to offer in the way of entertainment. Anyway, I rode into this country a stranger, and I never mixed much with the boys over that way."

"Then how did you know about the island being open for settlement?" Lawrie quizzed him.

"Old fellow that furnished wood for the steam-

boats that used to run up and down the river, he told me. He used to have a winter camp there, and the boats all stopped at his place to wood up. When the boats stopped running, he stopped cutting wood.

"He told me there was a natural meadow and everything a man would want to run a few head of cattle. He never said nothing about the lonesomeness," he sighed. "But then, it wasn't so darn lonesome for him, I guess. There was the boats — and then he had him a squaw."

"You ought to have a dog, at least," Lawrie suggested, seeing visions of himself sitting beside a cabin door with his faithful dog by his knee.

Gale Stilson turned reproachful eyes his way.

"Say, it's too darn lonesome down there for a dog," he protested. "I wouldn't ask the meanest, yellowest cur dog on earth to live the life I have to live on Scow Island!"

They topped the hill beneath which Smoky Ford sat in a ragged double row of meager houses that stared disconsolately at one another as if in futile inquiry of their purpose in being there at all. One of those depressed villages which has seen its prosperity slip away to a more enterprising neighbor, Smoky Ford loafed through the days with as little interest in life as the shawled squaws who rode in from the reservation to sit on the

warped sections of sidewalk and stare at each passer-by or at nothing at all.

But Gale Stilson brightened perceptibly as he rode down the dusty roadway.

"Gosh, ain't it a relief to strike civilization once more! Lightfoot, you'll have to come and help me get outside of a bottle of beer; or something stronger, if you want it. I ain't a drinking man myself. Wouldn't ever have tackled Scow Island if I was a booze fighter."

Lawrie laughed reminiscently as they reined in at the hitch rail before the Elkhorn saloon, and Stilson looked a question.

"I came out of this place swinging a chair over my head, last spring," Lawrie explained his mirth. "It wasn't because I was drunk, though. I had to dance or drink — so I danced. That's how I got the name of Lightfoot. But I'll try a glass of beer with you, just to spite the Meadowlark boys, who would give their eye teeth for the chance."

They drank together, and each man afterward went his way, feeling that a pleasant acquaintanceship had been properly ratified so that it might be taken up again at any further meeting without undue formality. Lawrie wished Gale Stilson five dollars' worth of fun for every nickel his vacation cost him, and in reply Stilson de-

clared that he meant to get some of the lonesomeness out of his system, anyway. He forgot to wish Lawrie luck; but perhaps he felt that Lawrie did not need it — since he was not obliged to raise cattle on Scow Island.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A GAMBLE

On every hand nowadays we hear that thoughts are powerful things; rays of energy shuttling back and forth from mind to mind, building or destroying according to their kind. Students of the thought world will consider it inevitable that the man who longed for solitude and the man who hated it with every protesting fiber of his soul should come together in a natural reaction of thought upon thought.

As a matter of fact, Lawrie had been swept so into the spirit of Scow Island that he could not pull his thoughts away from the place for very long, even though the break with Marge gave him poignant moments when he felt sick at heart over their quarrel. It did not lessen the hurt to tell himself that Marge would not suffer half so keenly as he would. Marge would simply take the stand that it was all his fault, and that he would admit it once his stubborn temper subsided.

For mental relief he deliberately let himself drift under the spell of his dreams. All that evening, sitting out on the high stoop of the little hotel with his chair tilted back against the

wall and his hat brim pulled down low over his eyes, he dramatized himself into the setting Gale Stilson had found so irksome.

Now he was pushing out his boat from its hidden nook on the mainland shore and sculling across to his island home. It was twilight, with a soft, violet glow on the hills across the river. He reveled long in that mental picture, dwelling upon the lights and shadows, the silvered pathway across the ripples that showed where the sun had gone. A beautiful, quiet scene that held him enthralled, clinging to the vision as dreamers do.

Later, he fancied himself throwing open his cabin door to greet the dawn flaring over the spired ridges that formed the boundary of his world. Artist's dreams, every one; singularly lacking in all the sordid, material details which had fashioned Gale Stilson's barren life, but beautiful dreams to Lawrie, furnishing a mental anodyne for all the hurts he had suffered.

Into this idealistic revery walked Stilson, clumping up the steps with a look of disaster in his hungry blue eyes. Lawrie blinked a few times, stretched his arms high over his head, yawned and came back to Smoky Ford with a jolt.

"Guess I was half asleep," he tendered. "How's the vacation? You look as if you had

quaffed deep of pleasure's cup, and found the dregs over bitter. What was it this time? Poker?"

He smiled wisely, feeling himself altogether sophisticated in the ways of struggling young Westerners on a vacation. Of course the man would blow his money in short order; that was what they all did.

Stilson sat down in a chair beside Lawrie, tilted it back against the wall and bit off a chew of tobacco.

"Nope, I don't gamble none," he said dismally. "Can't afford it. I learned enough about poker to know I can't play it to win, so I let it alone.

"Nope, I been talking with a fellow I used to know in Minot, before I ever come over here. He rode in on the stage, looking for me. Just luck I happened to come to town, or he never would have found me. He's got a brother that went to Goldfield last year, and Tike (that's the name this fellow goes by) is on his way out there. He stopped off at Chinook and took the stage down to see me. We been corresponding back and forth, a little.

"He wants me to go on out with him to Goldfield, Nevada. His brother's got a claim that's right in the boom district, and he wants to work it himself. He wrote to Tike to come on out and

bring all the money he could get together, and he'll give him an interest in the mine. Tike's going, and he wants me to go. I know his brother; nice boy, Jake is. I could get a third interest, Tike says, if I could put up a couple thousand dollars and turn in and work with them — fortune to be had right there, just for the digging. Ain't it hell?"

"I don't know. I never seemed to care about mines," Lawrie confessed. "All underground, black and dirty; nothing paintable around a mining camp, except the men. And once you sketch a few types you've got them all. I wouldn't want to go. You couldn't drag me out into a mining camp."

"Shucks, it ain't for the fun of it I'd go, nor to see a pretty town. I know what it's like. But there's a fortune to be made there. Beats lettin' your hair grow long on a darn, lonesome island in the middle of the Missouri River, watching calves grow up into cows and steers. Mining's different. You make your money quick, and get back into God's country."

"Yes, and you lose it just as quickly and never have the price of a ticket to God's country," Lawrie said, with a flash of wisdom. "I thought you said you never gamble."

"Well, I don't. This ain't any gamble. I

know Tike, and I know Tike's brother Jake. They're both good, honest boys and I'd get a square deal with them."

"Yes, but they can't see into the ground any farther than any one else, remember. Enough money has been sunk in mines to make every one in the country independently rich."

"Yes, and on the other hand, more money has been taken out of mines than ever was made in cattle."

"But when you lose, you're done."

"Oh, hell!" Gale yielded, "I'm done, any way the cat hops. I ain't got the two thousand, so I can't go. I just told Tike so, and that's what makes me so darn sore. If I had the money that's walking around on Scow Island under my brand, I could be rich in six months. I ain't got it, so it'll have to go on walking around, and in six years, maybe, I can see out for enough to buy bacon and beans the rest of my life.

"And in six years," he added gloomily, "I'll be so damn' bughouse from staying down there that I won't get any good out of life, no matter how much money I've got. That's the hell of it. When you get a chance to make your pile and make it quick, you can't take it because you lack the price to set into the game.

"I've got a little over three hundred dollars in

my jeans, and I figure on rollin' 'em high in Chinook, or maybe Great Falls; staying in a hotel and eating with a napkin and setting in a stuffed chair while I pick my teeth and watch the crowds go past on the sidewalk. I can live the high life for three weeks or a month, maybe, if I don't get too reckless. And come on back with new underclothes and socks and stomach trouble. Hell!"

The result any one could have foreseen who knew Lawrie Brunelle, knew the great, secret desire of his heart and the cause of his recent unpleasantness at the Meadowlark. But like so many of us who go forth to meet our destiny, Lawrie went rather blindly for a while. Dreamer that he was, at first it did not occur to him that here was an opportunity to put his dreams to the test of reality.

Instead, he argued the point with Gale, tried to show him the foolishness of joining a mining stampede. He told Stilson of a man he had known back in Iowa, who had sold his home and moved to Nevada, to one of the boom camps, and had died a pauper. Stilson listened gloomily and told Lawrie of men who had gone broke in the cattle business.

They were not getting anywhere, and their sentences were punctuated with yawns when Stilson's friend Tike came up and joined them. Law-

rie left them to talk wistfully of the fortunes to be made in Nevada, and went to bed thinking how foolish a man was who would want to leave a place like Scow Island and face the heartbreaking uncertainties of mining.

It was not until morning that it suddenly occurred to him that here was his own chance, if Stilson persisted in wanting to leave. If Gale would sell out for two thousand dollars, Lawrie would be perfectly justified in taking half of the money he and Marge had in the bank, and buying Scow Island.

The thought made his blood go jumping through his veins. He turned a little white around the mouth, and his eyes glowed. A daring idea; so daring that his hands shook while he dressed in great haste lest Stilson had already started for Chinook and the meager vacation he had planned.

Not once did it occur to him that his buying Scow Island was a foregone conclusion, surprising to no one who had listened to his talk with Gale Stilson yesterday.

He went downstairs all atremble with eagerness, and found Stilson just hitching his chair up to the table for breakfast. Lawrie could not wait. He blurted out his wonderful idea before he sat down, and thereby spoiled a greasy breakfast for

Stilson, who immediately became excited and as eager as Lawrie himself.

Would he sell out for two thousand? Well, you just watch his smoke! Cold cash, was it? He impulsively reached out his hand to shake on the deal.

"Gimme a dollar to bind the bargain, Lightfoot," he cried. "Jeeminy Christmas, I never was so tickled over anything in my life! Say, I don't believe I could go back down there and stay, after hearing about that Goldfield proposition. I'd just naturally go batty, thinking about the chance I'd lost. I'd be howling worse than the coyotes, and that's a fact.

"I'll have to let Tike go on ahead, I guess. I'd have to take you down there and show you the place, and give you a chance to turn down the deal if it don't suit you." He looked at Lawrie, his hungry blue eyes betraying the potential tragedy of that possibility.

"I wouldn't sell Scow Island to an Injun, sight unseen. You've got to have a chance to back out, anyway. How soon can you start? Better leave your pack mule here with your outfit. You'll have to come back, anyway, to take home the horse I'm riding, and you can take the mule down then, if — if you go through with the deal." The last few words seemed to stick in his throat.

"I won't back out," Lawrie told him, biting his lip afterward for self-control. "You don't want to get rid of that place any worse than I want to have it. If it's the way you have pictured it to me, it's made to order. How big did you say it is?"

"Say, it's big enough," Stilson said, giving him a quick, nervous glance. "I can't sell the island, mind. I've only got squatter's rights there. The blame thing ain't surveyed yet. It's about half a mile wide, and maybe two miles long from tip to tip. Trees around the edge, but the center is open and grassy. If you ever do stay long enough so your herd outgrows the island, you can push them across into some of them bottoms on the mainland. There's walled-in coulees, like, that I don't believe has ever been explored. You could run a couple thousand head of stock easy as a hundred."

"It sounds too good to be true," burbled Lawrie. "The wonder to me is that the stockmen haven't grabbed it long ago."

"Well," Stilson considered, "I guess they would have if they'd been put to it for range. So far, they ain't been crowded bad enough to want that rough country down in there. I've saw critters four and five years old, over in the breaks, that never felt a branding iron. Well, I'm ready

any time you are. Gosh, I can't realize that I can maybe go on to Goldfield, after all!"

"It's the most astonishing thing I ever heard of," declared Lawrie, whereas the only astonishing feature of the affair lay in his slowness at making up his mind to buy.

CHAPTER NINE

THE WHITE WOLVES HOWL

SQUARE and unlovely, built somewhat like a barn in appearance, but with big square rooms instead of stalls inside, the Frying Pan ranch house stood at the head of a square plateau which ran straight back to the hills that bordered the Missouri. The windows were square, none too clean and set high in the walls so that a short woman would have been obliged to stand on her toes to look out upon the square yard fenced in with barbed wire. But a bachelor establishment may be permitted these austere details, and Kid Kern and his brother were bachelors and seemed likely to remain so.

On Saturday night the yard began to fill early with vehicles of every sort used on the range, while riders galloped past to the stables. Young women and old cautiously descended from high spring seats, then turned and as cautiously reached for carefully wrapped bundles and packages which they bore into the house and deposited with smiling circumspection on the kitchen table that had been swabbed clean for the occasion.

The Frying Pan boys would eat fragments of fancy cakes for days after the dance, and surplus

sandwiches would finally be fed to the pigs. Range etiquette did not allow the carrying of food home from a dance, though it was permissible to retrieve dishes, towels or napkins — if the ranch aristocrats were so unwise as to risk napkins at a neighborhood party.

The Meadowlark boys arrived early, and Lark came soon after with Skookum riding beside him and Marge and Maw on the back seat of the spring wagon. Marge's eyes sought here and there among the men loitering along the fence or sitting on their heels against the house, and even Lark sent quick glances from group to group; but neither mentioned the hope of seeing Lawrie here to-night.

It was not until the dance was in full swing in the big front room that the irrepressible Tony came up to where Billy Prosser, Jim Stevens and Ring Lacey were standing just inside the door, smoking and watching a waltz quadrille. Seeing the three together reminded him of something.

"Hello, you white wolves of the cow country, why ain't yuh howlin'?"

"Hello, Tony Scare-uppa, we'll howl a-plenty before we hunt our dens," Billy Prosser came back at him with a grin. "Say, where's Lightfoot? Some of the boys here wants to see him dance. Didn't he come?"

"Aw, he's off huntin' you white wolves," Tony declared. "He'd sure come a-runnin' if he knowed his white wolf pack was here."

A statement of that kind needed explaining, and Tony beckoned them outside and proceeded to elucidate, without malice and merely because the description of the wolf picture formed a natural introduction to the story of the fight, which was his conversational goal. Tony liked nothing better than to talk about his combats.

"So you licked him, hunh?" Ring Lacey pressed forward eagerly. "Wish I'd of been there! I sure would have tore into him a-plenty. The dirty dog!"

"Why?" Billy Prosser elbowed him back. "Lightfoot's all right. He just done it for a josh, more 'n likely."

"Feller don't fight over a josh," Tony hastened to point out. "No, sir, he meant it. Just as good as called you fellers cow thieves. If you don't want to take my word for it, you ask the boys. They was all sore about it."

Billy Prosser studied him with eyes very keen for a boy of twenty.

"You know, Tony, you'd never spoil a good story for sake of the truth. I don't believe Lightfoot meant anything at all, till you boys jumped him about it. If you all commenced to bawl him

out about his picture, of course he'd get sore and say he meant it. Anybody would. I would myself."

"Yeah, that's all right, Bill. But you ask Bud what he thinks."

"Well, he don't think we're rustlers, does he, for gosh sake?"

"'Course he don't! But he thinks Lightfoot meant you was white wolves uh greed, preyin' on the range stock."

"Say, I never preyed on nothin'!" Jim Stevens put in, so loudly that Bob Leverett and Kid Kern, who were just going out to where a certain tall, ribbed bottle was cached in the woodpile, turned back to the group.

"Ain't it the truth, Bob?" Tony demanded. "Didn't Lightfoot paint these fellers' faces on a bunch of wolves that was after some calves? And didn't he call it 'The White Wolf Pack'?"

Big, good-natured Bob Leverett sent a warning glance at Tony, who was known among the boys as a fellow who couldn't hold his tongue. The Meadowlark boys were a clannish lot, and while Lightfoot might not be technically one of them, he had not been away from the ranch long, and it seemed to Bob that loyalty demanded silence about that picture which had already caused trouble enough.

"Aw, Lightfoot's always drawin' funny pictures," he said pacifically. "He never meant nothing. It was all just a josh."

"Josh!" Tony snorted, not wanting a good story spoiled. "It was just a josh, I suppose, when I licked him for slurrin' friends of mine like that!"

Bob chuckled.

"It sure was, if you call that huggin' match a lickin'. Us boys shore never called it a fight. We thought you was just havin' fun with each other."

"Hey, Mark!" Tony called sharply, as another Meadowlark man unwittingly sauntered into the controversy. "You tell 'em why Lightfoot quit the outfit so sudden. These boys wants to know the straight truth about it. Was it a josh?"

"That wolf picture he painted?" Mark came closer. "Shore didn't act like he was joshin' when he tied into you, did he, Tony?"

"How about it, Rosy?" Tony eagerly accosted the next man to join the group. "Was Lightfoot joshin' about them white wolves he painted?"

Jack Rosen glanced swiftly around the little circle as Bob Leverett nudged him with an elbow.

"Aw, what did yuh want to go stir up more trouble for, Tony? That pitcher didn't do no harm at all. Nobody seen it but us boys, any-

way. You fellers don't want to pay no attention to what this pelican chirps about. He's always hollerin' about something, anyway."

That did not help the situation any, though Rosen meant that it should. Jerry Martin came up and insisted on being told what all the talk was about, and it was Tony who told him — spitefully stressing the sinister meaning of the wolf picture.

"Yeah, an' he dared Bud to prove it ain't the truth," he finished vehemently. "Why, little Skookum flew up an' told Lightfoot that Billy here is his friend, an' that he ain't no cow thief! I shore tied into 'im myself, next day, an' he beat it off the ranch. He ain't showed up since; you can bet on that!"

Tony's version was close enough to the truth so that none of the boys contradicted him when he glared challengingly from one to the other.

"Us four are rustlers, hunh? Gee, Bill, did you know that?" Jim Martin grabbed Billy Prosser by the shoulder and gave him a shake. "Gee! We're sure comin' up in the world!"

"I'd sure like to see that wolf picture," Billy Prosser said earnestly. "What became of it, Tony? Have you got it at the ranch? If you have, I'll ride over. I'd like to see myself in the form of a wolf. That's sure rich!"

"I guess he took it with 'im," Tony doubtfully replied. "Us fellers oughta burnt it up when we had the chance."

Kid Kern, tall, black-browed and taciturn, stood back and listened without a word. Had his own name been linked with the affair he would not have been surprised, though he might have resented the implication. But the Frying Pan was a horse outfit and did not run any cattle, three or four milch cows, kept in a pasture, comprising their full cattle herd. Even Lightfoot could scarcely accuse his outfit of rustling calves.

Kid smiled to himself as man after man joined the group, curious to hear what was going on. He watched their reactions to the story, which even the most loyal of the Meadowlark boys could not hope now to suppress. From indignation the four who had been singled out as white wolves were coming to exhibit certain signs of self-importance, and were busily inventing things they would say to Lightfoot about his picture—give them the chance.

"Oh, don't take it to heart, anybody," Kid advised, when the floor manager inside began calling upon the crowd to get their partners for a square dance. "Let the white wolf pack run the hills in Lightfoot's imagination, and come on in

and dance. The girls 'll think you're all mad at them."

A few turned reluctantly toward the door, loitering to hear the close of Ring Lacey's diatribe against all artists.

"Jar loose, boys! Nobody's hurt any," Kid insisted.

"There's liable to be, though, if I ever see Lightfoot again," Jerry Martin promised darkly, aware of his audience. "Come on, boys, let it ride. Maybe he'll come sneakin' back before long — his sister's here yet, so he's liable to show up when the dust settles. He'll sure have a chance to hear us wolves howl when the time comes!"

"Darn right," said Billy Prosser in his soft voice. "Us white wolves 'll put him up a tree an' starve him to death. He can paint a picture about that, maybe!"

"Yeah, you're darn tootin'!" laughed Jim. "Come on and dance. I got my eye on a little Red Ridin' Hood right now, if somebody don't beat me to her."

"Ow-ow-*ooh*-ee!" howled Billy, making a boyish run toward the house. "Ridin' Hoods, hunt your gran'mothers — the white wolves is runnin' wild!"

They stampeded into the room, howling dole-

fully as they sought their surprised partners where the ladies sat primly against the wall on plank benches. The older women looked at one another and laughed indulgently without needing to know what it was all about, and the girls giggled at the new game of Red Riding Hood and the wolf.

Kid Kern slanted a significant glance at his brother Tom and exhaled a long breath of relief. The story of the slanderous picture and the rupture it had caused between the tenderfoot artist and the Meadowlark outfit would travel far and fast, but the boys were making a lot of fun out of it just now and the party would not be spoiled. Which, after all, is usually the main concern of a host.

CHAPTER TEN

THE DANCE AT THE FRYING PAN

"Yip! Yip! Yip! Yip! tunin' up the fiddle;
You an' take yo'r pardner there, standin' by the wall!
Say 'How!' make a bow, and sashay down the middle;
Shake yo'r leg lively at the cowboys' ball.

Big feet, little feet, all the feet a-clickin';
Everybody happy and the goose a-hangin' high;
Lope, trot, hit the spot, like a colt a-kickin';
Keep a-stompin' leather while you got one eye.

Yah! Hoo! Larry! would you watch his wings a-floppin',
Jumpin' like a chicken that is lookin' for its head;
Hi! Yip! Never slip, and never think of stoppin',
Just keep yo'r feet a-movin' till we all drop dead!

Yes, mam! Warm, mam? Want to rest a minute?
Like to get a breath of air lookin' at the stars?
All right! Fine night — Dance? There's nothin' in it!
That's my pony there, peekin' through the bars.

Yip! Yip! Yip! tunin' up the fiddle;
Well, them that likes the exercise sure can have it all!
Right wing, lady swing, and sashay down the middle —
But *this* beats *dancin'*, at the cowboys' ball!"

Henry Herbert Knibbs

"Bud, I hauled you out here to ask you what is the reason Lawrie isn't here to-night, and Marge looks so doleful, and above all, what is all this howling about? I tried to find out from Billy, but you know how he is when he doesn't want to tell anything. There's a certain veiled look that comes into his eyes, and then he dodges questions worse than old Blixen dodges the rope when you go to catch him in the corral."

Bonnie Prosser glanced over her shoulder toward the uncurtained window past which the dancers were noisily gyrating in an elbow-swing evolution — eight couples swinging in a room sixteen feet square — and led Bud Larkin down toward the gate which opened into the lane.

"You ought to know this wild bunch better than to take it seriously when they start howling," Bud responded lightly, watching his chance to steal a kiss as soon as the shadows enveloped them. "That your buggy over here? Let's go sit in it a while, Bonnie."

"I've promised the next dance to Kid — I'll have to dance that, for he's our host. And the one after that I promised to Lark — I wouldn't miss that for worlds, Bud, because Lark doesn't dance very often and he'd feel hurt if I slighted him. And after that ——"

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Bud. "Where do I

come in, Bonnie-girl? This is the first chance I've had alone with you ——"

"Well, let's not waste time arguing about it, Bud. That's a good, long quadrille — I put a word in dad's ear when I saw you coming my way. I told him to keep them going till they dropped in their tracks! He nodded his head and took a big, long drink of water, and if he doesn't give them the 'ocean wave' and 'birdie-hop-out-and-crow-hop-in', he knows what he'll get when he goes home!"

"That'll help some," Bud admitted, as he assisted her into the covered buggy and put up the top — for reasons of his own. "But I've been mighty hungry for a good long talk with you, Bonnie. I found a coulee with a dandy spring at the head of it, right up against the mountains above the Meadowlark. I want to show it to you, and then, if you like it, I'll file a homestead on it, and by next spring I can have things in shape so we can get married." His arm went around her and drew her close while his lips groped for hers in the dim starlight.

In the house the romping and stamping had ceased for the first intermission in the quadrille before Bonnie returned to the subject that had brought her out here with Bud.

"There's an undercurrent running like a mill

race in people's minds here to-night," she declared at last. "I've got to know what it is, Bud, because Billy is mixed up in it somehow and I'm worried. So is Marge, but there's a bunch around her all the time, so I can't get a word with her to find out what is the trouble. Something's wrong, and you must know what it is. If you don't tell me all about it, Bud, I — I'll never go near your old homestead!"

"It's nothing much, Bonnie. Nothing you need to worry about, sweetheart. Lightfoot painted a picture and it made the boys sore, so they jumped him about it and he packed up and left the ranch. He and Marge had a fight, because she sided with the boys and wanted him to burn the thing up. You know Lightfoot — burning a picture of his would be like ——"

"Like burning one of Marge's stories," Bonnie finished shrewdly. "I must say I'd be inclined to take Lawrie's part in a case like that. His pictures are — well, they're live things, you know. I don't suppose they're really great, or he'd be famous instead of just struggling along. But there's something about them that gives you the feeling that they are real identities. I think it's because he puts something of himself into everything he does."

"Trouble is, he didn't put himself into that pic-

ture." Bud laughed under his breath. "If he had — if he'd painted himself as a wolf, it wouldn't have been such a knock for the rest of the boys. No. Lightfoot got off wrong, that time. His White Wolf Pack was an awful slam at certain ones, from the boys' point of view."

"But what *was* it?"

Bud told her, as nearly as he could describe the picture.

"He said it was something he ran across when he was riding home from Anderson's," he further explained. "Jelly told me that Lightfoot really did claim he saw something of the sort; not wolves, of course, but a bunch of rustlers hazing some cows and calves down into Coyote Pass. So what does he do but conceive the brilliant idea of painting a symbolical picture, substituting a pack of white wolves for the riders, and giving each wolf's face a fairly obvious likeness to some fellow he knew? A darned good picture, too, if he'd only had the sense to omit the human resemblances."

"And I suppose Billy was one of the wolves," Bonnie guessed in a faintly perturbed tone.

"Don't let that worry you, sweetheart. Lightfoot has all the ruthlessness of an artist who takes whatever he wants to build his pictures, and doesn't care a whoop whether his subjects like it

or not. I tried to make the boys see that, but all they could sabe was the fact that he'd used nice boys, friends of theirs, for models. They all went straight in the air, and Tony and Lightfoot tangled over it. Mark was on the fight, too, and would have taken a fall out of Lightfoot, I reckon, if he wasn't so thundering big he's ashamed to tackle a man thirty pounds lighter than he is. That's all there is to it, Bonnie-girl, and that answers all your burning questions at once. Marge is all upset because she doesn't know where Lightfoot went, and the boys couldn't keep their faces shut, but told the fellows here about it. So the white wolves are howling their heads off, and having lots of fun over it. I'd a heap rather they'd take it that way, Bonnie, than go gunning for Lightfoot."

From the house came the squeak of fiddle and the plunk-plunk-plunk of guitar, while threading through the tuneful racket of shuffling feet and the spirited rendering of "A Life on the Ocean Wave, a Home on the Rolling Deep", came the chanting voice of old Dave Prosser as he hoarsely called the figures.

"Honors right an' left! Sashay by yer pardners, *swing!* Sashay back an' aleman left! Swing yer own! All join hands an' away to the left! First lady in the center and all run around!

Swing that lady out and gran' right-an'-left! Meet your own with a double el-*bow!*"

"Your dad's certainly shooting the whole works at 'em, Bonnie," Bud laughed, as he gathered her into his arms again. "If he keeps that lick up, this one dance will last all night!" He tilted her face upward so that the stars were reflected in her big, brown eyes. "It's going to take me a whole lifetime, Bonnie-girl, to show you how much I love you!"

She snuggled into his arms and shivered, not with cold but with the nervous dread that held her thoughts aloof from love-making.

"Bud, I'm worried about Billy. If all this wolf stuff is just a joke to the boys, why has he got that shut-in look on his face when he's off guard? Billy isn't taking it so lightly as appears on the surface, Bud. I haven't mothered the kid ten years for nothing, and while he can keep things from me — and he does, the little scamp! — he can't keep me from knowing that he's hiding something. When that invisible curtain drops in his eyes — oh, I can't find the words for that look, but I know the instant it shows itself — I know he's up to something he doesn't want me to find out about."

"It's possible he's sore about it, Bonnie. Billy's a sensitive kid, and he took quite a fancy to Light-

foot, I believe. And that darned, mouthy Tony is so proud of the fight he had that he wants the boys to think he was really defending their reputations or something. Rosy says Tony had a bunch around him this evening while he hashed over the whole thing and made himself a hero before them. They probably think Lightfoot really accused them of being rustlers. But Billy seems to be making a joke of it, same as the rest."

"No, Bud, he isn't. I know Billy better than you do, and I know he's got something on his mind. I wish you'd coax him over to the Meadowlark with you, Bud. If he's crazy enough to think he must hunt Lawrie up and defend his honor — oh, you can laugh, but Billy's just at the age when his honor is the most important thing in the world, and he'd kill a man that slurred him. Yes, he would! You've no idea of the temper that kid has got. He and Jim Stevens have been running together a lot, this summer, and they buy shells by the carton, Bud, and practise shooting off their horses — on the run, you know. There isn't a tin can on the Stevens ranch, or ours either, that isn't full of bullet holes! And they have daggers, and get out back of the barn and throw at a mark ——"

"In other words, they're normal kids running

absolutely true to form! How long do you think it has been since I had a certain tree down in the pasture that I used as a target for knife throwing? Why, I was fighting imaginary Indians and outlaws right up to the time when Lark chased me off to college! Bonnie, you're the best little trail partner a man could ever find if he rode the world over, but you're a girl, and Billy's a boy. There are some few kinks in a boy's mind that no girl on earth can understand, no matter how hard she tries."

"I know what you mean, dear, but you don't understand what *I* mean. Ever since last spring, Billy has been so grouchy and different, and he'll hardly do a thing dad tells him, any more. All he wants is to be off with Jim Martin, just fooling around with his guns and knife and rope, and if dad wants him for something on the ranch, you'd think Billy was being worked to death — the way he mopes around about it. And he's always telling what he'd do if this one or that one ever gave him any lip! Bud, I feel like shaking him!

"Just before the last dance he started past me and I stopped him to find out what he and Jim and some of the other boys are up to. I saw them out in the kitchen with their heads together, and I thought they were going to steal a

cake or something, so I went out there. They were talking about Lightfoot — something about 'getting Lightfoot first.' They saw me and scattered, of course. So when I asked Billy, he just shut up like a clam and wouldn't tell me a thing! And Bud, if Jerry Martin and Ring Lacey and that bunch are up to some meanness that concerns Lawrie Brunelle, I'll turn things upside down but I'll keep my own brother out of it."

"They're not up to anything, Bonnie. They may be a little sore, all right, but they wouldn't dare lay for Lightfoot even if they wanted to. If you're really afraid they might, though, I'll round them up and tell them he didn't mean anything personal. Jelly and I can square things for Lightfoot before morning, all right, if that's what worries you."

Bonnie was on the point of telling him that she wished he would talk to the boys, when the kitchen door opened and four indistinct forms came toward them.

"That's Billy, in the lead," she whispered. "Don't let them know we're here — I wonder what they want!"

"Sh-sh-h," Bud warned softly, drawing her closer. "We may get onto something, if they don't catch us here."

And so they waited.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BUD TAKES A HAND

"I'LL kill the damn' ———; that's what I'll do!" Billy snarled between his teeth as he led the way to the back of the buggy. "I'll shoot him down like a coyote. He can't pull anything like that on *me* and get away with it. I don't care a damn what the rest of you do about it, or whether you pass it up and don't do nothing. When a man gives *me* a slap in the face, like that, he's got me to reckon with. He can't put my face on a wolf's body and peddle the thing around — not and get away with it any longer than it takes me to find him and pull the trigger."

The two in the front seat felt the jar of the springs as some one lurched against the back. Another leaned against the wheel and moved the buggy forward a few inches with his weight. They heard the storm-proof lid of the luggage box behind them thrown up against the seat back, and Billy's impatient muttering as he rummaged among the extra wraps stowed there.

"Damn it, if Bonnie's went and swiped that bottle on me — no, I got it. Here, Jim, you take the first drink."

Bonnie's gasp gave Bud a startled moment, but the men behind the buggy were too deeply engrossed with their bottle to hear so faint a sound.

From within the house came the intoned command, "Wave 'em up an' wave 'em down, an' wave that pretty girl round an' round . . . an' on to the next!" Old Dave Prosser was doing his best to give Bud and Bonnie as much "sparkin' time" as possible. He liked Bud, and he liked Lark — and, if the truth were told, he liked the great herds of Meadowlark cattle and horses and the broad acres of rich bottom land along the Little Smoky which the Larkin boys called home. His girl would always have plenty, and that meant a great deal to old Dave Prosser.

"Wish I could find out where Lightfoot went to," Billy went on, after an interval which the eavesdroppers guessed had been spent in passing the bottle.

"He went to Smoky Ford. I know that for a fact," Ring Lacey returned. "He wrote Marge a letter from there, but he didn't say what he was goin' to do."

"A-all promenade — you know where an' I don't care!" Dave Prosser shouted hoarsely.

"Come on back. I don't want Bonnie to find out I've got a bottle along," urged Billy. "And don't anybody let on like we care what Lightfoot

done. He's my meat — me and Jim's. We know how to settle *his* hash, the dirty cur — come on. Paw's about run down, and he might come lookin' for me. Gosh, the folks think I'm nothing but a kid! Way they ride herd on me, you'd think, by ———, I was about four years old!"

The four trooped back to the kitchen door, Billy Prosser's slight form in the lead; as if, for all his boasted independence, he had only a naughty child's bravado which the first stern word of authority might subdue.

"Well, the young whelp!" Bud muttered, when they were well out of hearing. "Bonnie-girl, don't you worry over that young gentleman! I'll take it upon myself to tame him down. Good Lord, how fast we do grow up! Bottle, boasts, thirst for blood — all the makings, by Jove! — Look here, girl — you aren't going to *cry* over him? Say, if you do that, I'll go in there and march him out by the ear, and paddle him good!"

"Oh, but he's drinking!" wailed Bonnie, stifling a sob against Bud's Sunday coat. "You know yourself — if he's started *that* — and running with older men that — that encourage him — he'll go to the bad in spite of me!"

"He won't go to the bad in spite of *me,*" Bud stated grimly. "Half of that is just play-acting, trying to kid himself into thinking he's a real

man. I'll take him in hand myself, little girl. I'll make him partners with me on the new place, and keep him so darn busy playing up to my game that he'll forget all about this toughness he's trying to learn."

"But — but in the meantime, he'll have to ride round-up and help dad, and — and if he does see Lawrie ——"

"I'll be right there, Bonnie-girl. Say, do you think, after all the bronks I've gentled and trained, I can't gentle a twenty-year-old boy? Billy's all right. He just wants to be grown up, and the poor chump thinks he'll make it by acting tough. Don't cry, sweetheart! Do you want to make me hate Billy? If you do, just start in crying your eyes out over him! I'll have a talk with him, first chance I can find, and I'll take him over to the Meadowlark for a while and show him that place I'm going to take up, and get him to plan with me to start an outfit of our own over there. Your dad will probably stake him to fifty or a hundred head of cattle — I'll have a talk with Dave too. He'll see the point, and give the kid a chance to make good with a little outfit of his own.

"That's what Lark did with me, Bonnie. Straightened the kinks out of me, too, being treated as if I were a man. Why, good Lord! If

it's men pals that Billy wants, I'll be a better pal than those boneheads he's trailing with. Your dad's all right, but he doesn't realize the kid is growing up. You heard what Billy said — he resents being treated like a child, now that he's twenty years old. I know how he feels, because I went through the same kind of spasm when I was about his age. Never mind if he has taken the notion that it's manly to drink whisky and have feuds. That's just his way of jumping over the fence and galloping off to what looks like freedom. He's a good kid. He's just playing the game of being tough, but he'll come out of it all right."

Bonnie dried her eyes and smoothed her brown hair, called Bud a wonderful fellow and went in to dance with Kid Kern, much lighter of heart than when she had run away from the merry-making. Now that her upstanding young sweetheart had assumed the full responsibility of her recalcitrant young brother, she felt as if the problem were solved. Even Billy's unusual hilarity gave her a fictitious buoyancy of spirits, in spite of the fact that she must have known that the bottle in the back of the buggy had much to do with his sudden exhilaration.

Bud, however, did not share her optimism as unreservedly as he would have her believe. Now

that he was committed to the mission of coaxing Billy Prosser back from the precipice, he began to notice little things which otherwise would not have attracted his attention at all. He saw that Billy and Jim Stevens — a quarter-breed son of an old "squaw man" who lived just over the edge of the reservation — clung together between dances and more than once disappeared altogether from the crowd. Jim was about Billy's age, but bigger and more sophisticated; a low-browed, sulky lad, with little schooling and no visible ambition for anything better than his present environment. That environment consisted of three drinking, gambling, fighting elder brothers, a swarthy sister and a half-breed mother who padded silently about a dark kitchen and took no part in family affairs. Jim Stevens was not a proper companion for Billy Prosser, and Bud decided that first of all he would ease the boy away from that friendship.

He tried to get near Billy; to fall into casual talk with him as they stood with the group outside the door, smoking after a dance. But Billy shied away from him almost as if he suspected Bud's purpose. Bud twitched Frank Gelle's coat sleeve as he passed him, and presently the two were in conference down at the corral where their horses were tied.

"I don't know, Bud, just how you're goin' to work it," Gelle pondered, when the case had been laid before him. "'Course, I'll help all I can, but it ain't going to be easy to get him away from them boys. If Billy's got a bottle we could swipe that, maybe; but what good would it do? There's a barrel of it here to-night, cached around this place and that. The kid can get all the whisky he wants without goin' near his own."

"Yes, but he doesn't want Bonnie or his dad to find out he's drinking. He's afraid some of the boys might tell his folks; that's why he brought a bottle of his own. If I could just coax him to go home with us——"

"Say, just drop the hint that you expect Lightfoot 'll come on back to the Meddalark, and you can get Billy quick enough."

"But I don't want to get him over there by a trick," Bud objected. "What I want is to win the kid's confidence and pull him away from the bunch."

Gelle gave his whimsical little chuckle.

"Try a team and log chain, Bud," he advised. "Say, I got it. S'pose I lead him off somewhere and get him so drunk he won't dare go home, and then we take him to the Meddalark to sober up where his folks won't suspicion nothing? Now, that there is a scheme, Bud!"

In spite of himself Bud laughed. It was like Frank Gelle to propose the most ridiculous plan he could think of, but when the time came for action he would be as dependable a man as Bud could find in the country; which was the main reason why Bud consulted him now.

"You're a hell of a prime minister, Jelly," he complained. "Anyway, the thing resolves itself into this: That young hound is in a fair way to get himself in trouble if he keeps on the way he's started, and if I can't jar him loose from the bunch he's running with, why, I'll run with 'em too! So you tell Lark I'm after a runaway colt, if I don't get back to the ranch with the rest of you, Jelly. I wouldn't say anything to the rest of the boys about it, though. Mark is pretty thick with Jerry Martin, and Jerry and Ring are chums; it would get back to Billy that I'm out to reform him, and that wouldn't do; not *a*-tall!"

They left it at that and strolled back to the house, where refreshments were being passed in milk pans to the lined-up crowd, with great pitchers of fragrant, steaming coffee following the sandwiches and a bucket of sugar bristling with tin teaspoons hard on the heels of the coffee. They rushed to the kitchen, snatched up a tin cup apiece from the diminished pile on a table, and took their places at the tail of the line.

Billy Prosser, a bit bloodshot as to eyes and throatily vociferous, was standing squeezed between Jim Stevens and Ring Lacey, banging his tin cup against the stair rail and shouting for the coffee to hurry up. Bonnie sat near the improvised stand for the music, and when she saw Bud she beckoned.

"He's half drunk, and I'm so afraid dad will find it out!" she whispered distractedly, when Bud went over and perched on a corner of the table beside her. "I never saw him act so, before. Did you get him to say he'd go home with you, Bud?"

"I haven't talked to him yet, Bonnie. They're dodging me for some reason. But I promise you this: He'll go with me, or I'll go with him. Don't you worry."

The sandwiches arrived at that moment, stacked high in a paper-lined dishpan. After them followed a bewildering assortment of cakes, cookies, doughnuts and cucumber pickles, and Bud forgot his mission in the delightful game of trying to eat some of everything that was offered him.

When he remembered to look for Billy, that young man was nowhere to be seen. Bud reluctantly detached himself from the feast and began an unobtrusive search, and before he had

finished he discovered that three other young men were missing: the three white wolves, as it happened. In the light of a late moon he searched the corrals. So far as he could tell, the four had taken their horses with them. Certainly Ring Lacey's horse was gone, and so was the big brown horse which Billy Prosser rode as a rule. Bud remembered seeing it tied near his own when he and Frank Gelle had visited the corral less than an hour before.

They could not have been gone long, he knew; but long enough to make them hard to find, once they reached the ford where three roads branched off from the trail to the Frying Pan.

Bud looked at the house where the fiddle and guitar were twanging again, the players tuning up for another boisterous half night of dancing. Even the old folks were not thinking of leaving yet; the young fellows would normally be the last to go. They must believe they knew where Lightfoot was to be found, he thought, and slipped the bridle over the head of his Walking Sorrel.

It had been so easy to promise Bonnie that he would go where Billy went! It had looked a fairly simple task to pit his own influence against the unwholesome friendship of Jim Stevens and to lead Billy gently away from the brink of the abyss. Bud knew the danger well enough: a dan-

ger as real and as deadly, to a boy of Billy Prosser's age and temperament, as the pitfalls of a great city can produce.

Even Jerry Martin, though every one liked him, was prone to periodical sprees which lasted as long as he had a two-bit piece in his pocket. Moreover, he was known as a "poker fiend" who would play the clock around and finally get up from the game feeling that the world was all against him and life was a hollow mockery. Ring Lacey also gambled more than was good for his pay check. Popular they both were with the range men; hard riders, good fellows on round-up — but not just the sort Bud would choose for a young brother of his own to pal with. And if Billy Prosser wasn't his own brother he was Bonnie's, which was the same thing in Bud's eyes. For whatever stood close to Bonnie Prosser was sacred to Bud.

As he swung up to the saddle and rode quietly past the house, keeping well out in the darkness of the lane, he was tempted to call Frank Gelle out to ride with him. But that would cost several precious minutes and might excite remark, and he abandoned the idea. Frank would know that he was on the trail of the white wolves, and why. Bonnie herself would understand. He eased past the house, therefore, stopping by the

gate just long enough to dismount and feel in the back of the Prosser buggy. The bottle was gone.

So Bud went galloping away from the lights and the laughter, the squeak of violin and the rhythmic strumming of guitar, on the trail of Bonnie's kid brother who had gone in drunken zeal to blot out in blood a fancied stain upon his honor. It all sounded melodramatic enough when he put it in words, but nevertheless Bud knew no other words would quite explain Billy's going. And the boy had half an hour's start; Bud blamed himself for relaxing his vigilance even for a moment.

Once well away from the house he pulled up and dismounted to strike a match and hold it over the road. Galloping horses going down the lane would leave hoofprints behind them, and Bud wanted to make sure he was on the right trail. There they were, plainly visible in the beaten soil; shod hoofprints pointed toward the mouth of the lane. Bud blew out the match, mounted and rode on.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DEVIL TAKE THE HINDMOST

THE night was calm, with thin clouds drifting up from the southwest, ragged ribbons of gray mist which scarcely dimmed the starlight. As he slowed the Walking Sorrel to a walk on the steep trail down the hill to the creek which flowed languidly through the wide draw at the foot of the benchland fenced in a great square tract by the Frying Pan outfit, Bud would have sworn that he heard men's voices talking together at the ford. While he listened hopefully he heard a splashing through the shallow water and then the muffled cluppety, cluppety, clup-clup cluppety of horses' hoofs beating a swift tattoo on the gravelly trail which was a part of the creek bed in time of high water.

He had reached the foot of the hill and was crossing the high-banked cut through water-gouged, rough bottom when a rider came loping to meet him, coming from the ford. Bud slackened his pace at the top of a short slope. Perhaps Billy had thought better of his revenge and had turned back. He knew Billy Prosser sober was not the boy to ignore authority altogether,

and he thought a lot of Bonnie. Bud's spirits rose perceptibly.

But the man who came riding up from the creek was Butch Cassidy. The two recognized each other while twenty feet of space divided them, and both pulled up short. Butch swung his horse sidewise across the trail — ready to turn tail and run if need be, though Bud in his hot anger at the moment believed that Butch was barring the trail. But much as he hated Butch Cassidy in his heart (for the two had clashed more than once before and it takes more than a handshake to wipe out some scores), Bud bit his underlip and took the affront, remembering his mission was for Bonnie.

"Hello, Butch." He saluted the shadowy form in level tones that plainly said, "Take it or leave it."

"Why, hello, Bud," Butch replied in kind. "Dance ain't over a'ready, is it? Can't be much after midnight."

"No, it's going full blast — or was when I left. Which way did you come, Butch?"

"Me? Why, I come a-horseback, Bud."

"Meet anybody on the road?" Bud spoke through his teeth, holding back his animosity as best he could.

"Not a damn' soul, Bud." Butch's tone was

guarded but it bore all the inflections of sincerity.

"And that's a lie, but which way did they go?"

"Bud, I wisht you wouldn't talk like you doubt my word," Butch plaintively objected. "Far as I'm concerned, you and me needn't be fussin' every time we meet."

"What are you blocking the road for?"

"Why," said Butch, "that's this darned old skate I'm ridin', Bud. Won't stand uphill; always twists himself around so he's on a level."

"Ever try it yourself?"

"Standin' on the level? Say, Bud, you got no cause to throw it into me every time we meet up with each other. If I ain't been on the level with you, I'd like to know who has!"

All at once Bud saw his purpose and touched the Walking Sorrel with his heels.

"All right, Butch, I'll take your word for it," he said, as the big sorrel brushed past, forcing the other horse to turn uphill whether he liked it or not. Butch was killing time for those who had stopped at the ford to talk with him, holding Bud as long as he could without coming to an open clash.

All of which served to dampen Bud's rising spirits as he spurred through the shallow ford and on into the road that led across the reservation.

Why should Butch Cassidy try to stop him before he could overtake those four? He probably knew of the insult which Lawrie had unwittingly given the quartette, but he had no quarrel of his own with the artist. Was he a close enough friend to them that he should feel obliged to give them what help he could?

Bud did not like that implication, in so far as it involved Billy Prosser. Butch Cassidy's reputation was of a peculiarly dark shade which cast a shadow on those who called him friend. Or so Bud would have told you. He believed Butch was guilty of killing two men not so long ago, and that for the express purpose of robbery. True, there was no direct evidence against Butch, and he had not even been arrested for the crime. Instead, the matter had come to a point where Bud had felt constrained to apologize to Butch for calling him a thief and a murderer. Nevertheless Bud's opinion remained much the same, down deep in his mind. He even accused Butch (still deep in his mind) of knowing more about the cattle stealing than an honest man should.

But that, he was constrained to admit, was chiefly because he did not like Butch, who rode for the Frying Pan and went boldly enough among men, minding his own business as well as most. Nevertheless Kid Kern himself had warned

Bud against quarreling openly with Butch. "If you ever pull a gun on Butch, you better pull the trigger," he had advised him. "Butch packs *two* guns — one of them in sight."

It irked young Bud Larkin that Butch nearly always came out best tongue in a wordy sparring match, but he had no time now to satisfy his own grudges. The delay had given Billy a fair start again. Bud spurred the Walking Sorrel into a run.

The road he believed they had taken told him nothing. It was the road to Smoky Ford, a short cut across the reservation, but it was also the road to Prosser's, and to the Stevens ranch as well. The boys might be going home with Billy, or with Jim, for all Bud could tell, though he did not believe they were leaving the dance for any such peaceful reason as that. He took that trail, therefore, though the roads branched in a sandy stretch that would not hold tracks distinctly. They had talked as if they believed Lightfoot might still be found in Smoky Ford, and Bud meant to go there unless he could overtake them before.

Pounding along through the hills with ears strained to catch the sound of riders ahead of him, eyes fixed upon the trail in the hope of seeing them silhouetted against the starry sky line as they topped some ridge, it was some time be-

fore Bud heard the sound of galloping hoofs on the trail behind. At first he thought he was hearing the horsemen he was pursuing, and relaxed his headlong pace a bit — since he had no intention of rushing upon them as if his errand was a matter of life and death.

He had an idea that he could make it seem quite natural that he should follow Billy. With the proposed partnership as his errand, he would say that he wanted Billy to go with him to see the land he had chosen for a homestead claim, and to talk over their plans for starting an outfit of their own. Since he had not found a chance to speak to Billy about it at the dance, it was perfectly plausible that he should ride after him and ask him to make the trip now, before fall round-up started. Surely no one could suspect his real purpose, he thought.

But the thud of hoofbeats splashed into a little stream which he had just crossed in the hollow behind him, and the possibility that he himself was being followed nagged its way into his consciousness. That did not greatly matter, since other riders might be leaving the dance and taking this trail home; though this was not likely, either. Bud knew range dances too well to believe this particular revelry would end before sunrise.

"Plenty to eat, plenty to drink, good music and a jolly crowd; they'll keep it up till it's time to go home and do the chores," he summed up his cogitations, and reined sharply off the trail behind a clump of bushes. It would do no harm to see who rode that trail in as great a hurry as he was.

But the sound ceased altogether, and though he waited while a horseman could have ridden half a mile at an easy lope, no one appeared. Bud cursed his imagination and went on, feeling a bit foolish. When he heard the galloping horse again — as he did, presently — he bit his lip and wondered whether he was the victim of a bad case of nerves. And finally, when he could stand it no longer, he repeated his ruse of dodging aside from the trail and waiting until the other came up. But no one came. Once more he rode on, less at ease than he would have admitted, for he could not ignore the fact that Butch Cassidy was no safer in the dark than a rattlesnake; not so safe, since the snake would not go hunting a victim unless he was hungry.

So he came to the foot of a long slope where the road forked again, one trail running up the hill and across a level plateau to Anderson's ranch, set close to the boundaries of the reservation. The main trail led straight on for a mile, where another turned off to the Stevens place,

and a little farther along, the road which crossed the creek and stopped at the Prosser gate.

Bud rode on past the Anderson turning, then reined in the sorrel just to make sure that he was not mistaken in the idea that he was being followed. If it was Butch, the sooner he knew it the better he would feel.

This time the hoofbeats did not stop when he stopped, but kept straight on up the hill, so close that Bud had a fair glimpse of the rider; Butch Cassidy, he felt sure, though he could not have explained just how he knew, except that the vague outline of the man and the tilt of his hat resembled Butch. Bud watched him ride on up the hill before he himself continued along the road to the Stevens place — since that was nearest.

"Now what the devil does Butch want at Anderson's?" he puzzled, and presently gave it up. Anderson was no friend to Butch, as every one knew. Anderson had lost a good saddle horse the year before, and he had always been convinced that Butch Cassidy knew more about its disappearance than he would ever tell, though the evidence was too weak to impress the sheriff, or even to warrant Anderson in taking the matter into his own hands. But he had talked about it, and Butch had heard the talk and sent back a

sneering defiance. The two did not speak now when they met in the trail. No, Butch certainly could have no business at Anderson's. Moreover, Anderson was at the dance with his two cowpunchers, and the ranch was left alone.

Bud wondered, but he did not turn back to follow Butch as he might have done if his desire to overtake Billy had been less urgent. The boys might be headed straight for town, and if so, Bud would have a hard ride ahead of him since he must turn aside to see if they were at either ranch before he went on.

A light shone in the Stevens kitchen and Bud rode up to the door, dismounted and knocked. Jim's half-breed mother, swarthy and stolid as any squaw on the reservation, opened the door and blinked at him.

"Ya-as, boys come home. Jim seeck. I geeve med'cine, tell Jim go to bed. Ya-as, Billy come. Billy seeck too. I t'ink too much w'isky for boys."

"Ring Lacey and Jerry Martin — did they come with the boys, Mrs. Stevens?"

The snaky black eyes regarded him steadfastly for a moment before she had any answer to that.

"Mebby they come — I dunno. Goo'by." She shut the door and left Bud to figure it out for himself.

Bud went to the bunk house and found it empty of boys, sick or well. He mounted and rode down to the stable and with lighted matches made certain that no freshly ridden saddles were anywhere about, nor any sweaty horses in corral or barn. Since the entire Stevens family, save the breed woman, was at the Frying Pan that night, the silent emptiness of the place was conclusive evidence that the squaw had lied, or that the boys who had come home sick had not taken to their beds.

Bud remounted the sorrel and considered what his next move should be. It was useless to question Mrs. Stevens further. She would repeat what she had told him before, or else she would turn stubborn and refuse to say anything at all, and in any case he considered her no friend to his mission. And yet — was it possible that she really believed the boys had gone to bed? They could have left without her knowledge. But they couldn't have stayed long, because, in spite of his various halts while he waited to see who was coming behind him, he knew that he could not have been more than half an hour later than they. Not much time in which to doctor two sick boys and send them off to bed! Bud returned to his belief that the squaw had lied to him.

He was on the point of turning to take the trail

over to Prosser's just to make sure they were not there before he went on to Smoky Ford, when he heard the noise of galloping horses on a trail behind the stables, leading away up a draw toward the southwest. This, as Bud knew well, was a short-cut trail to Anderson's ranch. He reined the sorrel out of sight under an open cowshed and waited to see who these late callers might be. If they were coming from Anderson's they could not be the boys he wanted, he was thinking, when they clattered up to the corral fence and stopped — the four he had been trying to overhaul.

"He ain't here," Jim Stevens said disgustedly, as he dismounted. "Butch lied to us so'st he could make the haul by his lonely. Damn him for a low-down double-crosser, anyway! Next time ——"

"I *told* yuh there wasn't anything in it," cried Billy. "What'd Bud Larkin want of us, anyway? You couldn't jar him away from the dance — not while Bonnie's there."

"If he come," said Ring Lacey, "he'd likely go to the house and ask for us, don't yuh think? Let's go see if the old woman seen anything of him."

The three seemed to agree with that suggestion, Jim Stevens elaborating somewhat upon what he

would do if Butch had lied to them. They trooped off to the house, their voices mingling in trivial argument, each one trying to make himself heard above the rest. The kitchen door opened, a yellow oblong of smoky light; stood so for as long as it took the four to step inside, then shut with a bang.

Ducking his head to avoid the log gable, Bud rode out of the open shed and into the trail to Prosser's ranch, down which he walked the sorrel for perhaps a quarter of a mile before he turned and loped back again. The boys were back from the house and unsaddling their horses when he rode up. Their hands paused from their work while they stared at him without speaking; on guard, uncertain whether to turn hostile or not. But Bud had taken time to think what he would do and he met them with mild surprise.

"Gosh, you boys are as easy to catch as fleas on a dog!" he called good-humoredly. "You gave me a ride to Prosser's when I didn't find you in the bunk house here. Say, Billy, I've been fogging along behind you all the way from the dance, to see if you don't want to go on home with me and look into a little business proposition I want to make you. I was telling Bonnie about it, and she thought you'd like the idea——"

"Hell of a lot Bonnie knows what I like!"

growled Billy, mindful of his audience and still roughened by the whisky he had drunk.

Bud clicked his teeth together, mastered a sharp retort and spoke much more carelessly than he felt.

"Well, I like the idea myself — but of course we don't have to go into it this time of night. I just thought I'd better see you about it while I'm over this way, so we can look the ground over before round-up." He paused, eyeing Billy sharply from under his hat brim. "How about it? Too tired to make the ride over to the Meadowlark with me?"

He saw Billy's glance go swiftly to the faces of his companions, and he saw Ring Lacey give an almost imperceptible shake of the head. Billy shifted his feet as if his mind were ill at ease.

"I guess I can stand as much ridin' as you can, Bud," he said sulkily. "But I don't know as I can go. I've — I may have other fish to fry."

Bud laughed.

"Well, I wouldn't waste time frying chubs," he said. "This fish I'm ready to put in the pan is big as a whale."

"What is it?" Curiosity got the better of Billy's bad temper.

"Well, it's a way to get your start in life, Billy. But it will keep till morning, I guess. And that

isn't so far off, either, so we may as well bunk down somewhere till daylight; what d' you say?" Bud swung off his horse, mindful of another sly interchange of glances. "You going to stay here to-night, Billy?"

Billy hesitated, picked up the dragging cinch and began to loop the latigo through the cinch ring, very much like a child who has been detected on the brink of a bit of mischief.

"Aw, I guess we better ride over home," he said grudgingly. "I s'pose I'll have to let the folks know I'm goin'—if I do take a notion to go. Me and Jim had a—a huntin' trip planned, and paw wanted me to help round up a bunch of horses to-morrow. He'd raise hell if I went off without sayin' anything."

"I don't mind waiting over, if it's necessary," Bud assented, gathering up the reins and swinging into the saddle. "It will beat making another trip over here, and I'm bound to thrash out this scheme of mine to make us a stake, Bill. I'd like to get it settled, and there isn't much time. We're getting our *remuda* in shape for round-up."

"Can't yuh take the rest of us in on this fine scheme?" Ring Lacey bantered. "Me, I been lookin' all over for a snap. Me an' work is about to have a fallin' out, Bud."

"Yes? Well, I've chosen Billy for this little

snap, and there's only room for the two of us right now. Later on, maybe, when we're millionaires, we might let you boys sit into the game. Eh, Billy?"

Bud forestalled a hasty conference between Billy and Jim by sending the sorrel sidling closer to where Billy was making slow work of the tightening of his saddle. Jim, standing beside Billy, ceased muttering and stepped away. They were too stupid from drink to devise any further stratagem, and Billy finally lifted toe to the stirrup and went up rather clumsily, swinging his horse's head toward the homeward trail.

"I'll see yuh later, Jim," he called over his shoulder as his spurred heels swung in against the sweaty flanks of the brown.

"You do that, Bill," Jim made significant answer.

"Sure! We'll ride by here on our way home," Bud agreed with cheerful denseness. "I may want to swing around by Smoky Ford, anyway. I want to see if Lightfoot's still there, and tell him to forget it and come on back." He held the sorrel quiet while he drove the thought home.

"Darned chump — some of the boys rose up on their hind legs and made a great howl because Lightfoot happened to pick you boys for models in his last picture — that white wolf thing

he painted. I tried to tell them that he only used fellows whose eyes weren't round as a blamed hoot owl — like Tony's, for instance — and that he didn't mean anything personal. But no, they wouldn't listen! They were all on the peck anyway, because the stovepipe blew off the chuck house and made their supper late, and they were just aching for a chance to bully somebody. They took it out on Lightfoot because he's a tenderfoot and an artist and he's always stood for their joshing. But this is one time when he refused to let them wipe their feet on him ——"

"I heard he claimed he saw us fellers up on the ridge with a bunch of stolen stock," Jerry Martin cut in. "And that's a damned lie, and I'll ——"

"Yes, but it wasn't Lightfoot did the lying, Jerry. What he said was that he saw that ridge. The damned boneheads didn't wait to hear what he really did say. By the time they were through shooting off their mouths about his wolves, Lightfoot was so mad he wouldn't explain what he meant, and I don't blame him. Why, he used me for a stage robber, not more than a month ago! I posed for him all one Sunday, out on the hill above the Basin, with my rifle across a rock and a mean look on my face — and the meaner I looked the better he liked it. That

didn't make an outlaw of me, did it?" Bud laughed, glancing up from the cigarette he was rolling while he talked.

"Lightfoot picked me for that part because my nose stood up distinctly under a bandanna mask!" he further elucidated. "I suppose, if my eyes were the right shape and light instead of dark, I'd have been a white wolf too. I'm sure glad," he artfully enthused, "you boys had the brains to take the whole thing as a joke — unless you feel it's a compliment, which I suppose it is, since an artist is pretty touchy about his subjects. And between you and me, I think there was more than a touch of jealousy in some of our outfit. Tony and Mark, for instance, have been at Lightfoot to use their faces in some picture, and Lightfoot kept putting them off. Finally he told them straight out that their faces weren't exactly paintable; they were too ordinary, he said. What he was after was the picturesque quality in faces and figures and they can't qualify. Tony is too stocky for his height, and Mark is oversize and beefy; not the pantherlike litheness of the real range Lothario — if you get my meaning."

They probably did not, but no one confessed his ignorance. Indeed, they made absolutely no comment whatever, and Bud waved out his match

blaze and once more gathered up the slack in his bridle reins.

"Well, if we do decide to ride around by town, we'll see you in the morning," he said. "So long, boys."

He had won, in a measure. Still, he was worried in spite of the winning. He hoped that he had succeeded in turning them aside from their vengeance on Lightfoot, but there was plenty to hold him awake that night and staring at the ceiling while Billy in the next bunk slept stertorously, drugged by too much liquor. He had ridden sullenly homeward and had gone to bed without a word to Bud, the veiled look in his bloodshot eyes. What were his half-stupefied thoughts, Bud could not even guess.

He sat for a while with the lamp lighted as a signal to Bonnie that they were there, if she and her father drove home early from the dance. As he smoked he studied the boy's unconscious face, trying to read the significance of that unyouthful hardness which clung to his mouth even in sleep, and the scowling lines on his forehead. It might be the whisky; and yet ——

What were the boys doing over at Anderson's, that time of night? Rather, what had they planned to do and had been prevented from doing because of Butch? It could not have been

anything lawful or right, since Butch had thought it necessary to turn back and, riding warily on Bud's trail, intercept the boys and warn them that Bud was looking for them. He wished now that he had followed Butch to Anderson's; though without the gift of second sight he could not possibly know that the boys would be there. Clearly there was a great deal which he ought to know, if he were going to win Billy Prosser away from bad company. And, just as clearly, there was a great deal more which he must by all means keep Bonnie from ever knowing.

On the whole, Bud had won more worry along with his small victory.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A LAMB IN WOLF'S CLOTHING

"IT'LL be awful darned lonesome, away off over here," Billy Prosser predicted with melancholy satisfaction in the sacrifices he was making. "If we could have some of the boys in with us——"

"Give us six months to get on our feet," Bud patiently explained, "and we can have the boys, of course. Two or three if we need them. But did you ever notice, Bill, how the boys who are always running around in bunches never seem to get ahead of the game? Just cast your mind over the fellows we both know, who have never got anywhere or made any more money than they can jingle in their breeches' pockets. Every blamed one is plumb lost unless he's got three or four with him to josh with and swap stories. He hasn't the backbone to buckle down on a ranch somewhere and let his work furnish him what entertainment he needs. No, he's too weak-kneed to stand the gaff, so he rides around over the range, looking for a snap. Like Ring Lacey, for instance, always down to his last four bits and always yowling that the world owes him a living. The world doesn't owe any man a damned thing he's too lazy to earn. And he can't earn

him a ranch and a bunch of fat steers to ship every fall, and money in the bank, by sitting in some other man's bunk house or in some saloon playing stud poker."

Billy stared straight out between his horse's ears and said nothing to that.

"Some of them," Bud went on, thinking of Butch Cassidy and that mysterious visit to Anderson's unguarded ranch, "think the world owes them the living some other fellow has earned, so they start in trying to collect — picking dark nights to present their bill to their neighbors' belongings."

Billy shot him a sidelong look.

"That way looks easy, but it isn't. There never yet was a thief who didn't pay three times over for every hoof or every dollar he ever stole."

"What are you preachin' at *me* for?" Billy demanded, with what Bonnie called the shut-in look on his face.

"Why, I wasn't preaching at you, Bill. Good Lord, no! You're no thief, of course." He saw Billy's lips pinch in and went smoothly on with his discourse. "I was thinking of some of the boys who don't get ahead as fast as they'd like. You know, between you and me, Bill, I've begun to wonder if Ring Lacey is absolutely on the level. I was thinking of him mostly, when I spoke.

Maybe it was something in Ring's tone when he said he was looking for an easy snap. He was joshing, of course — but did you ever notice how a man's real feelings will show in his voice when he doesn't know it?"

"Ring's a friend of mine," Billy said perversely.

"What I mean is that he's no friend to himself," Bud replied calmly, determined after a ten-days' intensive study of Billy to drive home a few truths without betraying his knowledge of the boy's need of them. "By the time a fellow is Ring's age he ought to have something to show for his work. Ring ——"

"How do you know Ring's broke all the time?" Billy countered. "I betcha Ring 'll be on easy street before we are. He's takin' in all kinds of money ——" He stopped suddenly and began to fuss with his rope.

Bud chose to pass over the slip.

"It's the habit of saving that I'm talking about. Easy come, easy go, as the saying is. Maybe this ranch of ours doesn't look romantic — I know I've got a batch of fine large blisters, digging out the place for the house — but, Bill, it sure is all to the good as a money-maker. Your dad told me he was going to turn over five hundred head of mixed cattle and ten head of horses to you, whenever I can tell him you're making

good — ready to settle down, that is. Maybe he's holding it back for a surprise, though — so I wish you'd just keep it under your hat. You're in your twenty-first year, they tell me. Won't be long till you can take up a homestead of your own. First thing you know, old boy, you can ride around and give orders to your men."

Billy did not find anything to say to that, though Bud, watching him from the tail of his eye, saw that the gloom had lifted a little from his face. The Prossers were Scotch, he told himself, and the blood in Billy's veins must respond to that bit of news, which he had held back until their long trip was nearly over.

Other things he had withheld from Billy; as, for instance, the length of the trip he had persuaded the boy to take up the river to the place he had chosen for a homestead. Billy, hobnobbing with the boys at the Meadowlark, had not given much attention to the pack Bud was carefully assembling. He had supposed they were to be gone only a couple of days — three at the most. Instead, Bud had kept him out ten days, on one pretext or another, with a bear hunt up in the mountains for good measure. Billy had liked that and had shown the side of his nature which was most like Bonnie, and Bud had taken heart. But with a bear-skin trophy to show the boys,

Billy had grown moody and impatient to return to the things Bud was trying to wean him away from. And now, when they were actually on the way, he had found it expedient to dangle the final morsel of bait before the boy's imagination. It was all he could do, and he hoped that it would stir the enthusiasm for homesteading which thus far he had failed to rouse.

"Of course," Bud mused, as they rode along in silence, the pack horse trailing along behind, "I've got to figure that the kid is going to need more entertainment than I will. I'm older, and then — I'll have Bonnie." The thought held him enthralled so that he forgot the Billy problem for a while, as was quite natural.

At the top of the hill leading down into the Basin, they met Jack Rosen and Frank Gelle, who were coming from town fairly bursting with news, and after the first greetings they began to unburden themselves.

"Well, they got Anderson, Bud," Rosen broke the news without preface. "I told the boys he was shootin' off his mouth too much about burnin' his hay an' stables ——"

"Yeah, but it was the money he made the biggest roar about," Gelle interrupted. "It was Kid Kern shot him, but then, he cut down on Kid ——"

"Good Lord, remember I've been in the hills and don't know a thing about it!" Bud stopped them, casting a quick glance at Billy. The boy had gone white as a corpse and was gripping the saddle horn with both hands to hold himself steady. Gelle saw it and shot a quick glance at Bud, who scowled a warning.

"Yeah, that's right. Well, a few days ago —"

"Just a week ago to-day," Rosen prompted.

"Yeah, a week ago it was. Somebody set fire to Anderson's stable and haystacks, and stole some money Anderson had cached in the stable. Looked like they thought the fire would kinda hide the robbery, but Anderson had it in a tin tobacco can and the can was missin'. Not more'n a hundred dollars or such a matter — and you'd think folks would quit buryin' money around home, and use the bank. Anderson didn't have much, and he claimed the bank wasn't any safer than what his stable was. Anyway, he lost the whole shootin' match.

"'Course, first thing he done was pin it onto Butch Cassidy and the Fryin' Pan boys. Him and Kid had been fussin' a little over their line fence. Anderson wouldn't help keep it up, and Kid tore into him about it a day or so before the fire."

"Jim Stevens was in town spendin' money

right an' left, right after the fire, too," Rosen put in at that point. "Some of the boys was talkin' about it to-day. Them Stevens boys are a pretty scaley bunch, and if they've got money you can pretty near bank on it, they never worked for it. Live off the Agency rations, I been told."

"Anderson laid it to the Fryin' Pan, Butch in p'ticular," Gelle took up the story. "And yesterday him an' Kid Kern met right where the trail crosses the creek between Anderson's and the Prosser place, and had it out. Dick Whaley was with Anderson, and he said himself that Anderson started to pull a gun on Kid. Or Kid thought he was goin' to, I guess. They's a warrant out for Kid's arrest — but shucks! They'll never git him; or if they do, they'll never convict him."

They had turned into the pass down through the cliff and into the Meadowlark Basin. Billy Prosser held in his horse and let the others ride ahead, and Bud dropped back beside him. He wanted a word with Billy.

"You fellows take the lead," he called. "Our horses are about bushed. Tell them we're coming."

Gelle understood, and nodded, setting a faster pace for Rosen who, anxious to pass the story of the killing along to the boys, hurried along willingly enough.

Bud looked at Billy, hesitated and then reached out and laid a hand on the boy's arm that quivered under his touch.

"Pretty narrow escape, Bill," he said quietly. "I know why that burning wasn't pulled off the night of the dance."

Billy's head sank lower on his chest. It tore Bud's heart to see how the boy was biting his lip to keep back the tears.

"Rosy's right," Bud went on very gently. "The Stevens tribe is a pretty scaley bunch to be mixed up with. I'm sure glad you've stepped away from them — in time."

Two tears rolled swiftly, one after the other, down the boy's cheek that was next to Bud, and that young man abruptly discovered that his saddle was loose, and evidently feared for his life if he attempted to ride half a mile farther without remedying the defect. He dismounted and took considerable time in tightening the cinch and in going back to make sure that the steady old pack horse (already in a half doze during the halt) was not in grave danger of losing his load.

Billy waited for him, sitting on his horse ten steps in the lead, with his head bowed and never looking back. When Bud finally remounted and joined him, they rode on without a word, Bud whistling a little tune softly under his breath.

"Well, she's a pretty fine ranch, Bill, but we'll have one just as good — give us a few years to whip it into shape," Bud remarked, when they drew rein at the corral.

Billy gave him a shy, grateful glance and looked away quickly, the slow blood mounting to his eyebrows.

"Yeah, you bet!" he agreed sturdily, like a child who has just walked safely out of bugaboo darkness into a warm lighted room. "This ain't a patch on the place *we'll* have, Bud!"

And Bud knew, with a leap in his pulse, that one white wolf was henceforth a lamb.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE LORD OF THE ISLAND RIDES ABROAD

MOONLIGHT flooded Scow Island and made of it a magic domain through which Lawrie rode slowly, feasting his soul on its beauty and trying to realize that he was master here.

A place of such tranquillity he had never seen, except in his own day-dreams. Even Meadowlark Basin, one of the beauty spots of the range, had lacked the peace of this remote island, guarded as it was from the outside world by the great river and by the Bad Lands themselves — that indescribable area of fantastic peaks and ridges, narrow gorges, twisting canyons and deep, hidden basins which are left here and there along our great rivers of the West to tell the story of the tremendous upheavals of the Tertiary period.

Even in daylight the gaudily colored sandstone formation was at once the delight and the despair of Lawrie's artist soul, but under the light of the moon the savage beauty of the scene enthralled him to a point beyond wanting to duplicate it on canvas. Awed before the magnificent riot of shapes and colors, he could only gaze in a kind of rapturous humility, feeling that even the hand of

a master trying to portray that scene would be a profanation.

But that mood lightened when he turned to view the wide grassland through which he rode, a dark line of trees standing afar off to mark the island's boundary. In that white light the cattle stood gazing at him in bovine meditation as he passed. They were not afraid when he rode close to stare gloatingly at the Triangle G, the monogram brand which was now his own property.

Even the big, lumbering Hereford bull with the tight little curls on his forehead placidly continued to chew a reflective cud as man and horse moved quietly toward him out of the moonlight. Lying full fed on a grassy hillock, a group of calves looked at him in baby wonder and did not trouble to rise.

Gale Stilson had not misrepresented anything — save, perhaps, the loneliness. Lawrie had not found it lonely, though he had been in possession of Scow Island for nearly two weeks and had not seen a soul. He had been absolutely happy; so happy that sometimes he felt a panicky sense of unreality, as if this were a wonderful dream from which he would suddenly awaken to find himself back at the Meadowlark — or, worse yet, in Iowa where he had grown up in the cramped life of a small town.

He did not even miss Marge, though the two had not been separated so long in their lives. Even their school days had been spent together; first in the home schools and later in the state University. Perhaps that was the trouble; perhaps they had lived too closely together to be really companionable. Whatever the cause, he knew that he did not want Marge to share the island with him — or the knowledge of it, if he could help it.

For that reason he had been careful to give her no clue to his whereabouts in the curt note he had written her. He had explained briefly that he had withdrawn half their joint account at the bank, and that she might consider the balance as hers, because he would make no further claim on it. He hoped she would be happy, as he expected to be. Had he been about to set forth for a voyage around the world he could not have been more indefinite as to his plans and destination, and had he been about to commit suicide he would not have sounded more final. So much for that.

This was a world of his own, peopled with friendly, dumb creatures that would not dictate to him and order him about, nor carp at his chosen work and try to tell him how he should do it. He felt that he had escaped from a tyranny

which had grown almost unbearable and to which he never would go back.

Through the trees he caught a vista that halted him there in the meadow and wiped all else from his thoughts. Across the river rose a turreted castle that seemed lighted for a festival, as the moonlight shone through crannies which the erosion of ages had made in the rocks. For a minute or two he was almost tempted to believe it what it looked to be, a castle perched high upon a ridge, one wing of the immense pile fallen to ruins while the rest remained habitable, the glow of the inner brilliance lighting up the slitlike windows.

Finally he shook himself free from the illusion and rode on, keeping to the edge of the woodland. The moon had climbed higher, the lights were out in the castle.

"Darned paintable, that. Sometime I'll come down and sketch that thing." He sighed. There was so much he wanted to get on canvas. "Make a ripping symbolical study — good as the wolf picture." And after a while he added aloud, "The darned chumps!"

Over on the nearest mainland a coyote yapped shrewishly, his last quavering tones echoing in weird mockery from the cliffs beyond. Lawrie stopped and listened until the coyote went on

about his hunting and the cliffs had ceased their eerie mimicry; then he, too, continued his leisurely journey to the lower end of the island from where he could have a clear view of the wild panorama below.

Gale Stilson was right; it must be all of two miles from the upper end, where the cabin and corrals stood, to the sand spit that marked the lower point of the scow-shaped island. Stilson had earnestly warned him against venturing out on that sand bar, which he said was "quick." He had lost two good cows there before he fenced it off, he told Lawrie. It was the only quicksand on the island — the only bar, for that matter. The remainder of the shore line was high-banked, with trails leading down the easier slopes to the water.

The ford was at the extreme upper end, and it was what Stilson called a blind ford. That is, on the island side one must start from around a little point, because of the cutbanks that frequently caved off into the water when the river was high. Around the point the bank sloped down to a solid bar of gravel which extended across within fifty feet of the opposite shore, where the channel cut through. Thirty feet of swimming water intervened between the sunken gravel bar and the shoal next the bank. Once in

the shallow water, it was necessary to wade downstream for several yards to a level landing.

Safe enough, if one knew the landmarks of the ford which Stilson had been careful to show Lawrie. One must wade up to a big white boulder on the mainland shore, then strike straight across from the point of the island and wade around that to the trail. Simple, but one must know the route or swim every foot of the way across and find his landing barred by the cutbanks on the island.

No wonder Scow Island was not visited by riders, Lawrie thought, as he neared the deceptive bar of sand gleaming yellow-white under the moon. Cliffs barred the mainland shore for miles, with the exception of the canyon mouth where Stilson always landed. Then there were cutbanks all up and down the island, save at the upper end which was hidden from view, and this lethal stretch of sand below.

But Lawrie did not care about the difficult approach. It made him safe from rustlers, he congratulated himself. He did not believe he would ever grow lonely here. How could he, in the midst of this riot of colors and castellated peaks, with the river placidly flowing on all sides of him with a gentle, murmuring sound inexpressibly soothing after the boisterous human activities of

Meadowlark Basin? The days were not long enough for all he wanted to do and to enjoy; and as for the nights, it seemed to him a crime against beauty to think of sleeping through a magic night such as this.

Take, for instance, the moonlight shining on the current, as it flowed close to the bold cliff on the mainland shore. For sheer beauty he had seen nothing this night to surpass it. On the upstream side of the projecting cliff, a black line of shade told where the rock had been rent asunder in the ages long gone; a crack which the erosion of time had widened a bit, so that now it was like a broad pencil mark of shadow on the pink sandstone face.

Against the cliff lay a ribbon of molten silver rippling swiftly down the river, little fluted ruffles tipped with diamonds and bordered with the placid sheen where the slower body of water flowed beside the full force of the channel. Above, the bold rock towered for a hundred feet; and where the river made a bend inward below the cliff, the moon painted the magic tints of distance. Behind all were the everlasting hills, piled carelessly in huge folds and peaks, with black canyons between.

Hands clasped one over the other on the saddle horn, Lawrie sat and gazed at that bit of river,

photographing the scene indelibly upon his memory, so that some day he might reproduce it; though he never could hope to catch that impalpable radiance which gave one a sense of beholding a vision vouchsafed only to the chosen few.

Jasper, throwing up his head to listen, brought Lawrie's thoughts to earth. From across the river there came the faint sound of a splash, as if a rock had slid down and struck the water from no great height. Again it came, and again; five or six splashes, so faint that he would not have noticed the sounds at all except for Jasper's sudden interest.

Then he saw black lumps floating down the silver pathway of the channel and heard a queer, snuffling chorus of sounds, such as he had heard one evening on a woodsy lake in Minnesota, when a band of deer, chased by dogs, took to the water and swam to the far side. He watched them until the last had drifted out of sight around the bend in the river and the snorting snuffle ceased. Though he waited for some time there was no more sound save the near, shrill yapping of coyotes.

A band of deer, swimming to safety from the killers on their track! Lawrie's nerves thrilled on the chase, though the predatory instinct was for

the most part dormant within him. But he had hunted deer in the northern woods, one never-forgotten vacation spent with an old woodsman friend of his father, and the zest of the game had strangely appealed to him.

He had heard that there were deer in the breaks along the river, and this proof of their presence set his blood jumping. They must have known where they were going — must have some retreat farther down the river, he thought. He would go hunting over there, one of these days, with his boat. A haunch of fat venison would be a treat, and the old woodsman had taught him how to make jerky. Yes, he certainly would go hunting across the river!

The incident served to pull him away from the trancelike ecstasy that had held him enthralled with the moonlit night. He exhaled a long breath, as of a sleeper waking from some beautiful dream, gave a last, long look at the silver ribbon that was again rippling untarnished against the cliff, and turned back up the island.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE RIVER REACHES FOR KID KERN

LAWRIE rode back up the island, unsaddled Jasper, staked him out in a grassy spot near the corral to feed through the remainder of the night, and walked reluctantly to the cabin. He still felt that it was a crime to sleep on a night like this, but he was a normal young man and he found himself yawning even in the face of the magical moon. He decided that the moon would shine another night, and that he had perhaps soaked enough of the loveliness into his system to last him for the time being.

It was then, just as he was about to enter the cabin, that he heard a curious splashing and snorting down where his boat was tied; a plop, plop, as if some one were striking the water with a piece of board, accompanied by a blowing, puffing sound like those he had heard across the river. He listened for a minute. The sounds continued, but they seemed to be moving down the river.

Perhaps one of the deer had made for the island. The thought drove him at a run down the path through the bushes and trees that bordered the bank. If the current were sweeping the

animal down river, he might be able to land it somewhere. Surely it could not scramble out alone, for the bank overhung the water — he did not know how far, but certainly for some distance.

He reached the spot where the boat was pulled into a small niche in the bank and tied to a stout willow branch that leaned out over the water. Standing on the extreme end of the steep path which had been cut into the bank for a landing, he peered down along the bank toward the struggling and snorting. It was a north shore line and everything lay in shadow, but it seemed to him that farther along some object rose against the bank, hung there for a moment and went down splashing. Some animal, from the panting, blowing sounds.

Having grown up beside a river, he was at home on the water, but his fingers trembled a little as he untied the rope and stepped into the boat. Without troubling to fix the oars in the crude homemade rowlocks, he sculled deftly out into the current and toward the struggling animal, seen dimly as a blacker blot in the shade, as it moved inexorably down with the push of the stream.

As he neared it, the object seemed struggling to turn upstream and come toward him. Two eyes glowed greenly as a head became distinguishable from the general blur. Lawrie sculled warily, not

quite knowing what any animal in a panic may do. Then he saw that it was not the deer he had supposed, but a horse and rider. Instantly he called.

"I'll throw the boat rope to you. Maybe I can pull you up to the landing."

"Let 'er come," a vaguely familiar voice replied. "This damn' skate — is about all in." So was the man, it would seem, from the short, jerky speech of him.

Lawrie crept forward and fumbled for the rope; stood up, balancing like a tight-rope walker, watched his chance as the boat swung up toward the horse struggling in the midst of a phosphorescent swirl, and flung the small coil. The man reached out for the rope, missed, and with the lurch of his body the tired horse lost his equilibrium and rolled over.

A tricky stream is the Missouri, with unsuspected, deep currents and eddies swirling around great submerged boulders that in high water become dangerous whirlpools.

Man and horse struggled together, then the man fought clear. Lawrie saw his head go sliding down river and forced the boat's nose around and after the weakening swimmer. He was dimly conscious that the horse was making frantic efforts to come up with him, but a vagrant current

was carrying the man out toward the middle of the stream — into the moonlight, as it happened.

There was no time now to waste while he placed the oars for rowing. Lawrie sculled furiously and so came alongside, leaned out and got a handful of black hair. One arm came up out of the water and hooked an elbow over the boat, and Lawrie grabbed for the shoulders and hauled him in. None too soon, judging from the way the fellow slumped over a seat.

The horse was swimming low in the water, valiantly following the boat. His eyes stared in mute supplication as Lawrie looked toward him, and Lawrie's throat contracted as if it were a human crying for help. He leaned and got the rope, pulled it in and set the oars in the rowlocks for the pull up against the current.

As he came alongside the horse there was a moment when he thought he would be overturned, but he managed to catch the trailing hackamore rope as the animal surged up, evidently wanting to get into the boat with his master. Lawrie thanked God then for two things: the moon which gave him bright light in which to work, and the length of the rope which Stilson used on his boat.

Those two factors made the difference between success and failure. Working feverishly, he man-

aged to tie the two rope ends together, and he was actually rowing the boat stern first up the river and dragging the horse with him, when his passenger weaved his shoulders from side to side like a drunken man, gave a great shudder and sat up. First he looked at the moon, then at the horse, still puffing and blowing water from his nostrils, swimming gamely with the aid of the taut rope. Then, twisting his body about, the man looked at Lawrie.

"Oh, hello, Lightfoot!" he said with some surprise. "On the dodge down here, are yuh?"

"Why, hello, Kid," Lawrie echoed. "I couldn't quite place you, just by your voice. You've had rather a close call."

"I've had closer," Kid Kern retorted grimly. "Got old Skeeter in tow, I see. Want any help?"

"No," said Lawrie, wondering what help Kid expected to give. Wondering, too, what had brought him to Scow Island in the middle of the night.

"Thought I'd struck the ford all right," Kid explained between deep breaths, "but the river's changed a lot, or something. Had to swim from the first jump-off. Island banks are cut under more, too. Couldn't find any footing nowhere. Damn' near called the turn on me, I guess."

"Yes," grunted Lawrie, chopping his strokes to make headway against the current. "Lucky I heard the splashing." Then he added, "Why didn't you holler?"

"Didn't know anybody 'd hear me. Stilson took the stage for Harlem over a week ago. Never s'picioned anybody 'd be on the island."

"I thought it was deer swimming across." Lawrie did not mean to sound regretful. "Thought I'd get some fresh meat. There was a bunch of deer that took to the water below here, a while ago, and when I heard your horse I thought here comes another one. I never dreamed any one would try to swim across; not in the night, anyway."

"Damn' near drownded," Kid muttered; which did not explain anything, Lawrie noticed.

The business of getting the horse ashore occupied him for the next few minutes, and he said no more. He swung the boat deftly into its niche in the bank, then held it there while Kid untied the ropes. The horse was tiring rapidly, still trying to come close enough to climb into the boat — lunging, struggling to feel something solid under his feet.

With a secretiveness which he recognized as a childish dread of sharing his island lore with any one, Lawrie went to a good deal of trouble to

get that horse out of the river and up the bank without taking it around to the point to the ford landing. He told himself that the horse could never swim so far — but he knew that was the thinnest pretence. The horse would not need to swim more than a few rods before they struck the gravel bar over which the boat with two men in it could barely float without scraping. From there around the point the horse could wade.

No, he had to admit to himself that he did not want Kid Kern or any one else to know about the present ford. Kid didn't know, that was certain, else he would have crossed easily enough. It was evident that the gravel bar had formed upstream since Kid had been to the island. He had missed it in bright moonlight, and he had nearly drowned himself and his horse. Whatever his errand to the island might be, Lawrie felt sure he would not want to come often — if he did not learn of the ford.

The two gained the pathway and somehow managed to pull the horse in to where he could throw his forefeet upon the bank. It was touch and go, even then, but they pulled him out and led him, tottering with exhaustion, up the bank and to the corral. Kid stayed at the cabin, where Lawrie stopped long enough to light the lamp.

"Get those wet clothes off, and I'll find dry

ones soon as I take care of the horse," he said. "Crawl into bed if I'm not back when you're ready."

Without making any reply, Kid began to pull off his soggy coat, that dripped small pools on Lawrie's clean floor. Lawrie went on with the horse, for the first time conscious of a great weariness. The fight to save those two had been greater than he had realized at the time, and by the position of the moon he knew that it had taken longer than he would have believed possible.

Kid Kern's rifle was tied to the saddle — evidently he had preferred taking it apart and cleaning it, to carrying it across the river in his hands. He could not have been sure of the ford as he had intimated, Lawrie thought. He must have anticipated a good deal of swimming water, or he would have carried the rifle.

Why had he come to Scow Island in the middle of the night, knowing that the crossing was risky? Why was he not with the rest of the Frying Pan outfit? It would be some horse-stealing affair that had roused the sheriff, Lawrie guessed, and sent Kid Kern into hiding. The whole Frying Pan outfit would be implicated, and Lawrie had heard the Meadowlark boys speak guardedly of a "hide-out" which the Frying Pan

was known to have down in the breaks somewhere.

It was not on Scow Island that they were prepared to hide out, that was certain. Behind the Frying Pan was rough broken country where they could evade pursuit indefinitely. There was no need of coming down here alone in the night. Kid had known that Gale Stilson took the stage for Harlem, but he had not known that Lawrie returned with Gale's horse to Scow Island.

That fact pleased Lawrie. It showed that he was not such a tenderfoot that he could not cover his tracks when he wanted to do so. He had planned to live down here unsuspected by Marge or the Meadowlark boys, and it looked as if his plan had worked, for if the Frying Pan outfit, which was reputed to know everything that went on in the country, did not know he was here, the Meadowlark would have small chance of finding it out.

He picked up the wet rifle in its leather case and went into the cabin.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LAWRIE WONDERS

"I GUESS I'd be laying at the bottom of the river, caught on a snag somewhere, only for you, Lightfoot," Kid Kern remarked at breakfast next morning. "Skeeter's a damn' good horse too. I'm sure obliged to you for pulling us both out, last night."

"Why, that's nothing," Lawrie returned politely, passing the stack of hot cakes. "It's lucky I was after fresh meat or I wouldn't have found you in time."

"Why don't you beef one of Stilson's calves? There's plenty running around on the island, I notice. He'd never miss one — and anyway, you could pay him something for it. I'll put in for half — I can git away with my share, I guess, before it spoils." He was holding a hot cake up by the edge, thoughtfully regarding it. "Guess I'll have to learn yuh how to make sour-dough cakes," he remarked. "You'll die if you eat these very long. And a man with the colic wouldn't want to tackle swimming the Missouri."

"I've got a boat," Lawrie reminded him. "But I'd like a few lessons in cooking, all right."

"Going to be here for a while?"

"I expect to, yes."

Kid glanced at him often while he spread the cake liberally with butter — Stilson having availed himself of all the comforts possible on the island, so that there was always plenty of butter, milk, cream and eggs. In spite of his inexperience, Lawrie's butter was better than passable.

"Pretty lonesome down here, ain't it?"

"No, I don't find it so. I like being alone."

Kid laughed to himself, though he did not seem particularly mirthful.

"Yeah, there's times when any of us likes to be alone," he said, and left it at that.

Just how long, Lawrie wondered, would it take a man to eat half a calf? It was the plainest clue he had so far received as to Kid's intentions. The nights were cool now; meat would not spoil very soon. A week? Lawrie thought Kid must mean to stay that long on the island, but in heaven's name *why?* Stilson had plainly told him that men did not come to Scow Island visiting. Certainly not the owner of the Frying Pan ranch, who always had plenty to occupy his time at home.

Kid was a big, good-looking young man of the swarthy type. His black mustache was smaller than that worn by most men who affected hairy

adornment of the face, and it revealed lips well formed, though with a cynical droop at the corners; not a mouth one could find much fault with, however. Lawrie decided that he could paint that mouth into the face of a prodigal son type—while the prodigal was still content with his riotous living and before the money was all gone. Kid's eyes were a very dark brown, of the kind that conceals thought save in times of stress, when they could hold a murderous gleam, Lawrie fancied.

Seen among men, Kid Kern had been an attractive rascal. The Meadowlark boys rather liked him, even while they knew him for a dangerous man to have for an enemy. They did not trust him very far, Lawrie knew. They would readily accuse him of any crime, from horse-stealing (which attached to him by common belief) to bank robbing or—or murder. But they had always been friendly with him.

Lawrie was conscious of a slight chill, generated by the manner in which Kid pulled his rifle out of its case and looked it over. He seemed to see Kid using that rifle: lifting it, his vengeful eyes looking down its barrel and steadying the sights upon a man he hated.

Just in that way did Kid raise the rifle and sight it out through the door, pulling the trigger

with a deliberate finger. All at once Lawrie felt sure that Kid was here on Scow Island because he had killed a man.

"I'll have to clean 'er up," Kid observed, glancing toward Lawrie. "Forgot the damn' thing last night when I rode into the ford — or where the ford used to be. Glad I did, now. I'd 'a' dropped it in the river. Six-gun's got to be gone over too. Don't suppose you know where there's any gun oil?"

"I think I saw a bottle in the cupboard," Lawrie said calmly, though his heart was pounding oddly now that he felt certain he was facing a murderer; a cold-blooded one, at that.

Kid Kern was not the man to kill in the heat of passion and then shiver with fear and remorse afterward. Looking now at the firm set of his lips under the silky black mustache, Lawrie could see no trace of weakness. If Kid saw fit to kill an enemy, he would kill deliberately. But who was the victim, that Kid should find it expedient to hide on Scow Island?

Some one whose death had aroused the countryside, probably; Kid would scarcely have forgotten his rifle, had he ridden into the river with a mind at ease. The oversight seemed to Lawrie strong evidence of a mind perturbed, shaken out of its normal functioning.

While he washed the dishes and tidied the cabin, Lawrie studied the situation. He did not like it. The more he thought of it, the longer he watched Kid meticulously wiping all the working parts of his guns, oiling the mechanism and inspecting the shells one by one to see if they were damaged by their bath in the river, the less he relished the presence of this uninvited guest.

He wanted to be alone on the island. It was his; he had paid good money for the seclusion it offered, and it seemed to him that he was entitled to peaceful enjoyment of the thing he had bought. At any rate, he wanted to be alone now to think, and to that end he took down from its wooden pegs the rifle which Stilson had left him.

"I saw a band of deer swimming down alongside the cliff, below the point of the island," he carelessly volunteered. "The coyotes or wolves were after them. They must have landed somewhere below. I believe I'll go over and see if I can get one. I won't be gone long. I'll take the boat"

"Better not," Kid very calmly advised him, working the lever of his gun to throw a shell into the chamber. "River's pretty bad, down below here."

"I should think the deer would have known that. Their instinct is very keen, and they'd

have headed for the island if they couldn't land below."

"You never'd make it back up here," Kid said, pointing the gun through the open doorway and squinting along the barrel. "I wouldn't want to see you git yourself in trouble — after hauling me outa the river last night. What makes you think you seen a bunch of deer swimming down?"

"Because I saw them," Lawrie told him rather brusquely. "And I heard them snorting, the way they do in swimming water; blowing the water out of their nostrils. I've seen deer take to the water, before now."

"Yeah, but they ain't liable to be there now, and anyway it ain't safe down river. Let's go beef a calf. I want to try out this ammunition. I'll fix it up with Stilson when he comes back. Come on, Lightfoot — we'll have liver an' bacon for dinner." He looked at Lawrie and carelessly added, "Don't need your rifle, Lightfoot. I'm takin' my gun — and I ain't liable to miss."

Lawrie hesitated, bit his lip and set the rifle against the wall. He did not want to have one of his calves killed, but he went out of the cabin because Kid stood looking at him expectantly; got Jasper off the picket rope and saddled him while Kid threw his soggy-skirted saddle on his own horse.

As they rode down the island, Lawrie was acutely conscious of Kid Kern's watchful eyes roving here and there, and of the chamber-loaded rifle resting across the saddle in front of him. Though there was nothing in Kid's manner which implied a threat or even distrust, Lawrie had no desire to cross the river deer-hunting against Kid's wishes. Nor did he feel like telling Kid that Gale Stilson did not expect to come back to Scow Island; that these cattle were his own, bought and paid for, and that he did not want one of his calves killed.

Lawrie had been careful that second trip to Smoky Ford. He had camped outside the place and had let Stilson buy two pack loads for supplies for him. The friend from Minot had witnessed the bill of sale with his signature, and not a man in Smoky Ford had seen Lawrie Brunelle. Thus had Lawrie's somewhat childish pride satisfied its grudge against Marge and the Meadowlark. Apparently his strategy had been successful, since Kid Kern did not suspect that Lawrie was monarch of all he surveyed.

But the very caution that had seemed to him so clever now irked him exceedingly. No one knew he was on Scow Island, and Kid must be well aware of the fact. If he really wanted to hide from every one he would certainly prefer to have the island to himself, and the question of what

Kid meant to do grew bigger and more insistent as the hours passed with dragging minutes.

A fat calf was selected; one of those contented bossies that had lifted its head and stared at Lawrie from the knoll, only last night. Always observant of details, he knew it by the peculiar white markings on its nose. It did not even trouble to run away when Kid rode up to it six-shooter in hand. After all, Kid did not try out the rifle for that close shot. Was it because the sound of a rifle shot would carry farther than the noise of a six-shooter? Lawrie wondered.

"Where you goin', Lightfoot?" Kid called sharply, as Lawrie started to ride away.

"Where I can't see the butchery," snapped Lawrie.

"Aw, come on back. It won't know what struck it." On the close of the sentence he fired.

When Lawrie looked, the calf was lying inert, a thin stream of blood weaving down its curiously striped nose. Kid stood eyeing Lawrie, the six-shooter still in hand.

Lawrie came back, feeling a growing hatred for Kid Kern. He wished savagely that he had left him in the river last night. He wished he could get away and find out what Kid had done, and tell the sheriff where he was to be found. But he came back and stood by while Kid put his

loop over the calf's head and remounted his horse.

"We can hang it up by the corral and dress it easier," Kid explained briefly.

It was Kid who cooked the dinner, frying liver and bacon deftly together. Lawrie washed the dishes and then got out his sketchbook, meaning to stroll off by himself on the pretence of wanting to sketch. But in spite of himself he loitered over his sketches, feeling sure that Kid's eyes were on him and that they were filled with suspicion.

"Where's that wolf picture, Lightfoot?" Kid asked abruptly. "I'd like to have a look at it."

"Where did you hear about it?" Lawrie asked, though he thought he could guess pretty straight.

"Aw, the boys was talkin' about it, time of the dance at our place. Say, you sure got yourself in bad, Lightfoot. The boys are plumb sore. You'll sure think they're wolves if they ever get wind of yuh down here. You want to look out for 'em. What put the idea into your head they was rustlin' calves?"

"Who said I had that idea?" Lawrie stood the canvas on the table and went on collecting unnecessary odds and ends for his sketching.

"Well, it kinda goes without sayin', don't it? But this ain't the picture I meant, Lightfoot. I

heard there was one that had some of the boys' faces on wolf bodies. That's the one I want to see."

Lawrie looked at him.

"Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not putting that on exhibition."

"You showed it to other folks, Lightfoot. Why won't yuh let me see it?"

"That," said Lawrie coldly, "is none of your damned business, Kid." He picked up his sketch-book and walked out, not at all sure that he would not presently feel a bullet in his back — which shows how much he trusted his guest.

But Kid only laughed at him from the doorway.

"Needn't get your back up, Lightfoot," he called mockingly. "Guess I'll go set in the boat and fish a while."

Lawrie had meant to take the boat himself and slip down the river under cover of the overhanging bank, but he changed his mind and swung off toward the meadow.

"Say, you ain't mad, are yuh, Lightfoot?" Kid's voice drawled behind him. "I've changed my mind. Guess I'll go along with you and watch how you draw pictures. I never did see an artist workin' at it."

Go along he did, and sprawled in the grass ten feet from Lawrie, smoking and apparently doz-

ing with his hat over his eyes while Lawrie sketched the castle rock which the moonlight had invested with a make-believe habitability and illumination, the night before. But whenever Lawrie paused to erase a line or to study the scene he had chosen, Kid was instantly alert and interested.

A maddening two hours for Lawrie that was, though he kept doggedly at his work until the sketch was finished.

Kid drew himself up until he squatted on his boot heels — the pliant strength of his muscles reminding Lawrie of a contortionist tying himself in a knot — and regarded the sketch with sincere admiration and awe.

"Now ain't that the very hell!" he ejaculated at last. "Natural as life — only it looks kinda like humans lived in it. How the devil do you make a few lines with a pencil show folks things that ain't there?" He spat into the grass beside him.

"Take this rock across the river: natural as life, but you got it lookin' like an old castle where folks has lived. Looks about a hundred years old; mebby more. Looks like there's been a battle an' killed 'em all off; or like they'd starved to death. Lightfoot, you sure are hell with a lead pencil!"

In spite of his resentment Lawrie's lips relaxed into a half smile.

"It's what I've felt about that crag ever since I first saw it," he said diffidently. "I didn't think you'd see it, though."

"I wish I knew how you do it," Kid's inscrutable, dark eyes were turned upon him studyingly.

"I — oh, I couldn't explain it." Lawrie flung out a hand in a gesture of inarticulation. "What I feel about things seems to come out through my fingers. I couldn't tell you how."

Kid's eyes turned to the ragged peaks across the river, hung there for a long look and swung back to the sketch.

"Just a mess of marks with a lead pencil, but a blind man couldn't miss the likeness," he said wonderingly. 'It sure beats hell!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

LAWRIE FOLLOWS THE MOON PATH

THE next night but one, when at dusk the moon was a great, orange disk and the sky was filled with a mass of troubled clouds, still darkly glowing with the memory of sunset, Lawrie got away in the boat and went slipping like a thief down under the bank thickly overgrown with a tangle of wild-rose bushes clogged with ripened hop vines.

The opportunity of his escape from the unblinking watchfulness of Kid Kern was, strangely enough, inadvertently furnished by that gentleman himself, and in this wise: Without relaxing his vigilance for a moment, Kid undertook to teach Lawrie the fine art of cooking.

His first lesson consisted of showing him how to bread veal chops and fry them; and although they came out of the frying pan badly scorched, the recipe held good and was dutifully recorded in Lawrie's memory, or so he told Kid.

The veal chops recipe demonstrated to his satisfaction, Kid essayed further culinary flights. He made two dried currant pies with crust so greasy it would not hold together when baked, and since

Lawrie did not eat pie — a tardy announcement made at mealtime after he had viewed the pastry — Kid ate a whole one himself.

The next day Kid baked a cake. His knowledge of cake making was largely theoretical. But since time hung heavily on his hands, he made a layer cake and used thick, sour cream instead of milk. To that he added for shortening a lump of butter the size of a teacup, with plenty of sugar and vanilla extract. Between the layers he spread as much chokecherry jam as the cake would hold.

It transpired that Lawrie was no fonder of cake than of pie; at least, he did not seem fond of that particular cake. It was too rich, he said. Kid hooted at the idea, and to prove it a sincere hoot he ate half the cake for dinner, washing it down with strong black coffee lavishly sweetened.

Wherefore the law of cause and effect worked inexorably upon Kid Kern. Long before dusk he lay flat in his bunk with a bilious headache which made death seem a pleasurable surcease from all the various pains that assailed him. In common humanity Lawrie did what he could, which was nothing beyond wringing a towel out of a basin of cold water and laying it across the sufferer's eyes. Further ministrations were profanely refused. At dusk Kid told Lawrie between groans to get out of there and let him die in peace.

Lawrie got — with alacrity and carrying the rifle which Stilson had left with the other appurtenances of the island.

As he slid quietly downstream, steering the boat with a homemade paddle so that he might face the full glory of that September moon, he forgot his smouldering resentment against Kid Kern and became again the artist gazing in rapturous awe upon a glory he could never hope to reproduce on canvas.

Never before, it seemed to him, had the moon come so close to earth in friendly radiance; a huge, refulgent globe of incomparable magnificence.

Across the river rose that gloomy pile which was his enchanted castle. Now, with its slitlike windows dark, its deep recesses shadowed, its somber aloofness chilled the beholder with tragic fancies. Lawrie turned his gaze upon the river over against the mainland shore.

Here, the current that had been flowing with silver-tipped ripples on that other night was only softly gleaming. The moon had not yet risen above the cold buttress of the cliff, and where the band of deer had swum down along its base was impalpable mystery. But straight before him the moon flung down a line of radiance slightly undulating, a magic sheen on its soft folds.

Down this necromantic course the ugly, flat-bottomed boat slid stealthily, carried by the unhurried sweep of the main stream. Face uplifted, eyes drinking in all the barbaric splendor of the craggy shore line, Lawrie moved the steering paddle only so much as would hold the boat fair in the enchanted pathway which led him down past the nose of the island with its treacherous bar of sand glowing now with a shine like cloth-of-gold.

Straight on down the moon path he went, angling the sweep of the current so that little wrangling water lips sucked against the boat's upstream side and the paddle was needed for propulsion. He was scarcely aware of the added effort that must be made to keep the boat in the moon trail, so enthralled was he with the fascinating journey. While the artist might have been content to sit passive on shore and study the golden pathway for its sheer beauty there amongst the wild grandeur of the broken hills, the youth of him drove him forward, eager as any rainbow chaser to see what lay at the end of the trail.

An odd conceit held his fancy. He would travel the moon trail to the end, and there he would land, if landing were possible, and study Scow Island from a distance. He wondered whether the island looked as peaceful from down river as

he had found it at close hand — until he had pulled Kid Kern out of the water two nights ago. The end of the moon trail must touch the mainland, he knew; a mile, two at most, and with the bending of the great river he must perforce bring up against the rocky shore.

How he would fare from then on did not trouble Lawrie. He was twenty-two, and he was for the time being free to follow every vagrant impulse that was likely to come into his mind on a moonlit evening. After two days of espionage and wordless restraint, he felt like a small boy playing truant. He had been warned against venturing down the river; told that he would never get back up it again. Now he was going and the warning merely added a fillip to the zest of it.

The current caught him, carried him swiftly close to shore, past the huge buttress of rock where he had seen and heard the deer swimming downstream. But the shore line curved sharply inward, and he saw the narrow break in the cliffs where a canyon slashed through.

There the current swung in, following the land, and he was obliged to paddle furiously for a few minutes to win free of its clutching grip and ride once more down the moon path which took no thought of currents or indented shore lines. Another half mile, and as the stream swung south-

ward again, he approached nearer and nearer to the shore. Once more he paddled across the deeper channel and rode down the brilliant pathway into quiet water.

Here the cliffs were broken down into huge, cubical boulders, like building blocks of the gods thrown into fantastic disorder by some primal convulsion of a world in the making. No landing place presented itself here, unless one chose to risk his neck on the confusion of broken rocks.

Lawrie was debating whether he should turn back or try and land, when he heard somewhere directly over his head the reedy tones of a harmonica playing Schubert's "Serenade" better than he would have believed it possible for that heart-twisting melody to be played on the one musical instrument which might easily be carried into this rugged wilderness. With his paddle braced against a half-submerged boulder he listened, wondering if it were possible that Bud Larkin, the best harmonica player he knew in the country, could be down along the river.

He could think of nothing that would bring any of the Meadowlark boys down here, however, unless it might be in search of the rustlers. In that case the searcher would scarcely advertise his presence with music. Moreover, in all the time Lawrie had spent at the Meadowlark, he never

had heard Bud play Schubert's "Serenade." Lawrie didn't believe he ever would play it as it was being played now. The notes were accurate though the time was not, and there was heartbreak running through the plaintive melody.

It wasn't Bud, he decided; for Bud's music had the swing of perfect rhythm and a care-free quality not to be mistaken; nor was this a piece likely to be popular on the range. Curiosity drove him ashore before the last melancholy notes came sighing wheezily through the moonlight.

With the boat rope he anchored his craft to the upthrust splinter of a jagged rock. As he began to climb, the music changed to "Over the Waves," that old waltz tune which has set many a cowboy dreaming while he danced in some lonely little schoolhouse in the range land. But this, too, carried a burden of tears that made the tune sound strange and not much like a dance piece. He began to think it might after all be some lonely cowpuncher playing at the moon.

The light was tricky, with patches of deep shade, and long before he reached the top the player's mood had changed and "Ave Maria" began uncertainly, ran up to the limit of the harmonica, broke off and started again with modifications which left out the high notes altogether.

It was during this performance that Lawrie climbed over a boulder and stood upon a broad ledge lying smooth and radiant under the full glory of the moon. Across from him a girl sat cross-legged on a flat rock, with her back against a low cliff, staring out across the river while she moved the harmonica back and forth across her lips.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LAWRIE FINDS ENCHANTMENT

"CIRCE!" said Lawrie, and bowed low.

"Another pig!" retorted the girl, uncrossing her feet and twitching her gingham skirt down over her ankles.

"I think I meant the Lorelei, instead of Circe, since your music lured me to the rocks." Then he bethought him of the conventionalities. "Good evening," he added.

"Good evening," she responded gravely. "You're wrong again. My name is Penelope and I'm very busy at my weaving."

This little speech, spoken with a certain breathless daring, brought Lawrie closer. It was not the kind of repartee one would expect from a range girl, he thought.

"And what are you weaving, may I ask?"

She turned and pointed toward the hills beyond the river.

"Stories about that," she said. "I don't see how you found the way up here, even if you did hear the music. The only trail is over on this other side of the ledge — unless maybe you came in a boat. But that's not possible."

"Why isn't it possible?"

"Well, because you couldn't get the boat into the water without a team; unless you have a boat of your own. Oh, are you that man who lives on Scow Island? If you are, you'd better go before father finds out you're here."

Lawrie stepped toward her, to where a projection of the ledge offered a comfortable seat.

"I don't want to go; not just yet, at least," he objected. "I came down the moon path to find enchantment, and I feel I've found it. Penelope weaving in her castle——"

"Oh, that's only by moonlight," she laughed. "Daytimes I'm merely Penny that washes dishes and is always lonesome. The enchanted princess — and sometimes I think I'd rather be one of Circe's pigs, unless the pigs kept the minds of lovers and knew they were pigs and felt ashamed all the while. Do you suppose they did? But in that case, they'd have attacked Circe when she went to feed them, and would have chewed her to shreds. So I think they were just pigs and nothing else." She lifted the harmonica cupped in her two hands and drew it slowly across her red lips, staring absently down upon the moonlit water.

"It doesn't take a Circe to turn men into pigs," she said, breaking off the plaintive strain as

abruptly as she had begun it. "It's dead easy. And some of them sure haven't far to go!"

"Spoken like Circe herself!" said Lawrie, watching her fascinatedly with the appreciative eye of the artist, and back of that the hungry heart of the man.

Penelope glanced at him suspiciously, caught a look in his eyes which was not like the look of any other man she had ever known in her hard young life, and shifted her gaze to the river, blowing that same soft, plaintive air from her simple instrument; music improvised as she went along, Lawrie could have sworn. And it was intolerably yearning and sweet, so that his eyelids stung unaccountably while he looked at her and listened.

An enchanted princess of a truth! Some day he would paint her so, staring out across the river to the rude castle just beyond. It was the thing he had been groping for — the wistful human note he had vaguely felt was needed in his foreground. He had thought of painting an Indian into the big picture he meant to do when he had familiarized himself with these elusive lights and shadows. But Indians were more or less commonplace in such scenes and he had mentally drawn back from the idea whenever it presented itself to him.

No, this was what he wanted. The Enchanted

Princess, in the checked gingham gown of the range woman, sitting alone on the ledge in the moonlight, staring yearningly across the river which held her exiled from her castle on the farther shore. He would make it symbolical of all the thwarted beauty, all the longing and the loneliness of the women who braved the wilderness with their men. Enough had been written and painted of the bold pioneers; he would give the world a glimpse of the pathos of the women. So he drank in the spirit of the picture she made with her brown plaid shawl lying in shadowy folds on the ledge behind her where it had slipped unheeded from her shoulders while she played. He would paint her with the shawl drawn up like a cowl over her face, her profile like a cameo but without the frozen calm. No, he would paint in the straining of her spirit against the bonds of circumstance ——

"I've never had any one I could talk foolishness to," she said abruptly, pulling out of her abstraction and glancing at him with whimsical apology. "You probably think I'm crazy or an idiot, as the rest do. But then — a fellow who will follow a moon path to find enchantment must have some imagination, so ——"

"I have so much imagination, Princess Penelope, that most people call me a fool."

She gave him an odd, half-startled look.

"Oh, is that the way you pronounce it — Pen-*ell*-o-pe? It's the second time you've said it that way." She bit her lip. "Every one has always called me Penny-lope — Penny for short." She gave him a vexed, half-ashamed look that stirred him deeply.

"I suppose you're right, of course, but it makes me out a terrible ignoramus. I must say I've always felt it wasn't Pennylope. That didn't fit the story of the princess, somehow. It sounds so — so like Jessie and Maggie and Minnie. Penny — Minny. Just like everyday people and not a princess in a castle. But I never had a chance ——"

"Most people call it Pennylope, but the other is prettier I think, and as you say, it seems to fit the princess better. Now, I have a very ordinary name, and it can't be pronounced so it sounds grand. My name is Lawrence. Lawrie for short."

"It's a very nice name," she said politely, "and it isn't a bit common. Well, Mr. Lawrie, can you help a princess with her weaving?"

"I'll try," he answered, never taking his artist eyes from her face, and thinking and planning his picture while he listened to her voice. "If the princess will show me the warp and the woof of

her weaving, and the flying shuttle of her thoughts."

She gave a little sigh of rapture at the words, which fitted so perfectly into her pathetic little game of make-believe, and pulled her shawl up over her head in almost the way Lawrie would have had it in his picture of her; so that he was obliged to restrain an impulse to go and lay the folds just as he wanted them to fall upon her shoulders.

"Well, over there across the river is my castle. If you have imagination you can see the lights shining in the windows when the moon is a little higher. That's where Pen-el-ope sat weaving, while her witless wooers stuffed themselves with meat pies and roast meat — a whole beef at one barbecue, and sheep by the dozen. Can't you imagine her sitting up in her own room, hating them in her heart of hearts as they carried on down in the banqueting hall at her expense, while she unraveled all her weaving of the day? I can, plain as I see the river."

"So can I, now you mention it. I knew there must be some especial history for that castle over there. The other night on the island I was watching how the lights finally went out in the windows, one by one — but I never dreamed Penelope sat at her weaving in the upper room. That

was two nights ago. Were you here then, Princess Penelope?"

She shook her head, some of the softness dimming in her eyes and leaving a bitterness in its place.

"No, I couldn't get away. The boys came that night and I had to help mother cook supper for them, and then I washed the dishes. I kept thinking about the castle with the moonlight in its windows, and I wanted so to come here and see it. I call this my balcony terrace. But this is the first chance I've had since the moon came full this month."

They fell silent for a time, both gazing out over the quiet stretch of water with the castle rock rising somberly above the rocky shore. What the girl was thinking Lawrie did not attempt to guess, for he was preoccupied with thoughts of his own.

It seemed to him that they had been friends long, long ago, in some other life; as if they were destined to meet here to-night, in just this way, and he had drifted down the moon path because it was the time of meeting and fate had long ago ordained that it should be to-night. Surely it never could have been chance that sent him forth on this particular evening, nor was it chance that had given Penelope the urge and the opportunity together, so that she was sitting here on her "bal-

cony terrace" playing on the harmonica to lure him up the boulder-piled height. Their meeting was altogether too fortuitous to be an accident, he told himself, while he gazed upon the picture he would one day paint.

"Sometimes," she said finally in a hushed tone, "I really believe that here is where the gods lived when they were on earth. And I believe that Jove hurled his thunderbolts in a great rage and destroyed the land and left it shattered and broken like this. And sometimes I think that perhaps I really am Penelope and that I am drawn back to the ruins of my castle, not knowing what it is that holds me here. But I am waiting and waiting, just as I waited for Odysseus in the old days. Only now I have forgotten what it is I am waiting for."

"For your destiny, Princess Penelope," Lawrie said softly, leaning toward her, all unconscious of the shine in his eyes — which was not the scrutinizing gaze of the artist but the glowing eagerness of the wooer.

Penelope's eyes were still upon the river, and she did not see his face; and if she had she would not have understood.

"I spoke about it once to mother; not about the Penelope part, but about this being the country where the gods and goddesses lived, only Jove

destroyed it in wrath. She said I was crazy and talked like an idiot, and it was plumb wicked to go on like that about gods. Only the heathens had gods." She twitched the sober brown-plaid shawl that was slipping again. "I suppose it really is foolish to imagine such things about this. I ought to remember it's just the Badlands along the Missouri, and let it go at that. But I can't. I keep on being foolish."

"There are two foolish ones, then," said Lawrie, crowding back the thoughts which must not be spoken — at least not now. "I have let my imagination run riot over these hills and the river. It would be an artist's heaven, except that it's rather overpowering. So far I have been burdened with the thought that the real spirit of these hills is too big to be put on any canvas. I've had to content myself with small bits here and there. That castle of yours, Princess Penelope — I made a preliminary sketch of that yesterday, thinking I might have the courage to try a picture of it some time. Most of the stuff here is altogether too fantastic to seem real. I have a sense of futility when I attempt to draw it. And yet," he mused, "I'm crazy enough to dream of doing something here that the world will consider worth while."

Penelope turned and gave him a long look, as

if he had only begun to stir a real interest in himself. Her eyes were starry with animation.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're an artist! Now I know that you really do appreciate all this. You can see it the same way I do."

"Yes, and that is why I want to be left — why I live alone on Scow Island."

He was conscious of a fleeting surprise at himself. Surely he had no obligation of loyalty to Kid Kern, who had invaded his solitude so brazenly; yet he had suddenly discovered that he could not betray Kid's presence on the island, even though he resented every hour of Kid's stay. There might be some vital reason for Kid's coming; some urgency which would constrain him to silence. He did not understand the impulse that had caused him to cover the fact from this girl, so he let it pass for the moment.

"I wish I could live alone," she said wistfully, her gaze returning to the castle rock across the river. "I don't see why a man can live alone and it's all right, but a girl must have a bunch around her all the while; people you don't like and can't talk to about the things you really think; old folks that want you to cook and scrub from morning until night and call you lazy if they catch you reading a book, and half-witted if you ever dare to use your imagination and talk of

anything except the bread-and-butter side of life.

"I wish I could trade places with you for a while — or at least find some island in the middle of the river where I could live alone. The folks think I'm a freak because I love these hills and try to put a little of it into music. Of course I can't, no matter how hard I try. I'm like you. It's all bottled up inside me, but it won't come out.

"If my own mother had lived I could have gone on studying music. She was a music teacher and a singer; a school teacher, too, and she gave music lessons out of school hours and Saturdays. She was a widow. She died with pneumonia, and the folks we boarded with just adopted me and let me stay on, because I was handy to help with the work. So I've almost forgotten my music, especially since we came down in here to live. I have some of my own mother's books and I read them on the sly, and oh, I just ache for music!

"I was only a little past twelve when my own mother died, but even then I wanted to be a great musician — a great violinist. Mother played the piano, but I learned to play the violin and we played together. I played in school entertainments, and once I played at a concert in the opera house, that some ladies gave for charity

at Christmas. I wasn't scared a bit, and they made me come back three times and play more. I played the 'Jewel Song', and then for an encore I played 'Nightfall' and the 'Angel's Serenade' — and for the last time they called me out the lady in charge had me just bow, because they had to go on with the program. It was just a few weeks before mamma died." She had lived that night over and over in memory, Lawrie knew, and a lump came into his throat for pity.

"I sometimes dream — would you think I was crazy if I told you the dream that's always in the back of my mind like a live picture?" she asked him wistfully.

"Not half so crazy as you would think me if I told you my dreams, Princess Penelope."

"Well, I've never dared tell any one except my own mother. She didn't think I was crazy. I told her when I was just a little thing, and she said I must work hard and practise and remember to hold my bow just right so it didn't squeak the high notes, and do my scales an hour every day, and I might make the dream come true some day. It did seem to be coming true, a little bit, when I played in the charity concert. But then she died, and — and that ended the music. But she was very wise and good, even if she did call me Penny-lope!"

"A green parrot could learn to pronounce words," Lawrie pointed out to her. "He could swing head downwards from his perch and screech Pen-el-ope all day long, but he couldn't think and love and teach you the way your mother did. Thousands of girls have been called Penny-lope. But since you are an enchanted princess I like to call you the musical name of the old story. So tell me your dream, Princess Penelope."

"Well — you'll think it's silly, I guess. I don't know where I got the idea, for I used to dream it as long ago as I could remember; long before I ever learned to play the violin. I used to dream that I was dressed all in white — straight, soft folds, with loose sleeves kind of like the Grecian ladies used to wear — and I was standing on a soft-lighted stage with a black velvet curtain behind me. I was playing a violin, and faces were looking up at me, just drinking in the music. Sometimes I can almost hear what it is I'm playing; nothing that I ever heard, but strange, beautiful music.

"When we moved here I used to have the dream for company while I played my violin, but I couldn't get the music to come; not *that* music. Then after a long time I discovered this balcony terrace, and when I sat looking out over the river on a night like this, I knew the music in my

dream was something like this; sweeping, slow melody and sharp high notes, with a majestic rhythm and a calmness underneath it all, like — well, like God."

She sent him a quick, challenging glance as if she feared the smile of indulgent ridicule. But Lawrie did not laugh. His eyes had the look of one who sees a friendly face in a crowd of strangers. He reached out and laid his hand on hers with the simple gesture of understanding which one man may give to another.

"I know. I've grown up with the same dream, only it takes a different form with me. I dream of a great, high-arched gallery filled with the exquisite work of the old masters. Frock-coated men standing in a group before a veiled easel. They are the judges. They will say whether my work is worthy a place on the walls.

"I am afraid to lift the cloth, and yet I am eager. I have worked — starved, almost — for this moment. I find myself shaking with dread of the ordeal, and yet I am proud of the fact that they are waiting to look.

"I uncover the canvas, and the judges crowd politely forward. They forget that they are there to judge the merit of my picture. They forget everything save the scene before them. I have never distinctly seen the picture that holds them

there, unconsciously paying me the tribute of silent absorption. Now I know that the picture is — this." He lifted his hand from hers and gestured toward the river, mentally placing her in the foreground of the scene; though he could not tell her that.

"Just two imaginative fools, seeing and feeling so much we can never hope to express," sighed Penelope, after a long silence.

"Perhaps some day we both shall see our dreams come true," Lawrie said to hearten her. "Perhaps, some day, you'll have a violin again and play it ——"

"I have one now," she told him dismally. "Mother — this adopted mother — took all the strings off — just *cut* them off, with the butcher knife! — and burnt them in the stove. She couldn't stand my caterwauling, she said. That was Schubert's 'Serenade'. She calls all the beautiful music whining and caterwauling, and she says it isn't music at all, it's just noise. It sets her teeth on edge. So I have to play this, when I play anything." She lifted the harmonica and turned it over in the moonlight, looking at it contemptuously. And all at once she laughed.

"Well, there's no loss without some gain," she said whimsically. "I don't suppose I should ever have found this balcony terrace if I hadn't

wanted to find a nice place to go and caterwaul on the mouth harp. All I hate is that I didn't find it till after she had burnt my violin strings."

"Violin strings," said Lawrie cheerfully, "can easily be replaced. You shall have more strings for your violin if you'll promise to play Schubert's 'Serenade' for me."

Penelope laughed again and clasped her hands around the battered harmonica in her lap.

"I'll play for you all you want, if you'll let me watch you paint. Or at least bring me some of your pictures to look at. All of them, unless you'd have more than a boat load."

"Trade you a picture for a piece of music," Lawrie bantered. "Who knows? Perhaps the inspiration of your music will help me paint my masterpiece."

"I hope so. But no painting in the world will ever help bring my dream to pass," Penelope said rather forlornly. "And you really mustn't come here any more. I forgot about that; we were having such a nice visit. I suppose this place is safe enough. But you might be seen on the river, and some one might take a shot at you."

"There's no law against using the river, I hope?"

"No," said Penelope, "there's no law against anything down here, I guess." She drew her

underlip between her teeth. "But you'd better stay on your island, Mr. Lawrie. It's been wonderful to have some one to talk to, but you mustn't come again. It's too risky."

Thinking of Kid Kern, Lawrie almost agreed with her; though he would not admit it.

As he rowed laboriously back up the river to Scow Island he planned how he would get violin strings for Penelope. Also he tried to devise some scheme for ridding himself of Kid Kern. And in spite of his complete isolation from the marts of trade, the getting of violin strings seemed to him much simpler than ridding himself of his incubus. Yet by some means not yet clear to him he was resolved to accomplish both impossibilities before this moon waxed old and the lights went out in Princess Penelope's castle across the river.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

QUICKSAND

When Lawrie stole into the cabin, Kid was apparently soundly and audibly asleep; a circumstance which Lawrie regarded with suspicion, since Kid had heretofore slept like a cat, with one eye and both ears wide open, so to speak. Now, his rhythmic snoring jarred Lawrie out of his dreams and set him to thinking rather uneasily of the absolute loneliness of Scow Island.

He tried to ridicule his perturbation; tried to convince himself that Kid's snoring was merely the result of his bilious attack. But he knew better than that. Without being able to explain how he cognized the fraud, he knew that Kid Kern was lying awake in his bunk, and that he was snoring to convince Lawrie that he was asleep. It occurred to Lawrie that Kid probably did not realize that when he really slept he breathed lightly and awoke at the slightest sound.

Moreover, he had set a deliberate trap for Lawrie. A bench that had been placed against the wall when Lawrie set the cabin to rights after supper was standing at an angle, one end protruding into the room so that Lawrie stubbed his toe against it when he entered and made con-

siderable racket. Kid had sighed and gone right on snoring; last night the noise would have brought him out of his bunk with his six-shooter in his hand. Lawrie knew. The wind had blown the door partly open last night with so little sound that he himself had not heard it, but had been awakened by Kid Kern's tigerlike leap into a corner and his harsh demand to know who was there.

As may be surmised, Lawrie did not sleep much that night. It was of no use to call himself a coward and a fool, or to argue with himself that, were their positions reversed, Kid would have settled his doubts in short order, as a matter of course and without any moral qualms. Lawrie was forced that night to realize that he himself was not of the warlike temperament. He would stand up to a man with his fists, yes. But any quarrel with Kid Kern would have to be settled with guns, because Kid was the shooting type of man. Lawrie was not. He knew it, now.

After a while the snoring stopped and Kid's breathing grew silent. It was not until then that Lawrie felt sure the mind that was Kid Kern had entered the mysterious quiescence of sleep, and there was no present need of straining eyes through the gloom, watching the shadowed corner where Kid lay in his bunk.

Daylight, especially if the way is warm and sunny, brings courage. Lawrie awoke with the optimistic feeling that he had all the best of the Kid, since he was on his guard while Kid believed him harmless and unsuspicious. Furthermore, he could shoot very straight, even if he had no stomach for shooting a man. Kid probably underestimated his fighting qualities, and for once Lawrie was grateful for that tolerant condescension which the West is prone to bestow upon tenderfeet.

The day promised to pass as others had done, in monotonous inactivity. After breakfast Lawrie busied himself with a Sears Roebuck catalogue, jotting down many things which he did not need, so that he might slip in an order for violin strings without exciting the curiosity of Kid, who sat in the doorway smoking and staring moodily at the hills. But he might have known there was no evading the notice of that alert young man.

"S'pose you'll ever have a chance to send off that order, Lightfoot?" Kid asked, just when Lawrie believed his thoughts were farthest from the cabin.

"Oh, I think so. I thought perhaps you'd do me the favor of mailing it when you go."

"Yeah — I might when I go."

"Well, I don't suppose you expect to live here

the rest of your natural life," Lawrie insinuated; which was closer to the point than he had ever ventured before.

"Depends on how long a feller's natural life is s'posed to be," Kid drawled. "I'd 'a' said my natural life come to a sudden stop yesterday when I et that cake. It sure was darned unnatural from then on. Funny. She was a good cake too. Best I ever et. She wasn't too rich, like you claimed. She was a jim-dandy. Must have been somethin' wrong with that chokecherry jell. Stilson must 've put arsenic into it or Paris green, or something.

"Come on, Lightfoot. Let's go kill a chicken and have some chicken soup for dinner. Seems like I've been eating kinda hearty since I come down here, and I want something light. I'll learn you somethin' more about cookin'."

Compliance had become a habit with Lawrie. He put away the catalogue and went with Kid to kill a chicken, and watched him dress it and prepare it for stewing. When it was on the stove, briskly boiling, Kid suggested a game of cribbage, using matches stuck into a cribbage board which he had manufactured the day before during the intervals of his cake-baking.

Lawrie didn't know how to play cribbage and he hated any kind of card game, but under Kid's

inflexible urging he consented to learn; sulkily, because what he really wanted to do was ride down the island with his paints and a small canvas, and try a picture of the castle rock for Penelope.

He had rather counted on a protracted illness for Kid, whose rapid recovery he considered an act of deliberate deviltry. Watching Kid, feeling that Kid watched him; wondering what Kid meant to do and how he could forestall it (whatever it was) did not help Lawrie's game. But he did not care how badly he was beaten. He was becoming rather desperate, and he felt that matters could not go on in this way much longer.

Yet they continued in just that way until nightfall. By that time Lawrie was ready for any recklessness, and when dusk merged into darkness and Kid seemed to be thinking of bed, Lawrie walked out of the cabin, muttering something about forgetting to shut up the chickens; he started for the chicken house and then, doubling on his trail around a little point of bushes, streaked it on his toes for the path to the river and to the boat.

He had no particular errand down river that night, except that he had told Penelope that he would like to be on the terrace and see the moon rise, because he thought the effect would be fine

on the water, looking down from that height. She had replied, after a moment, that it would rise at eight the next evening; and had added that her adopted parents were always in bed at that hour, which gave her a chance to crawl through her bedroom window and sit for a while on the terrace. The cabin was half a mile away, over a little ridge, she said, and she always felt safe from discovery once she was outside the house.

Neither had made any positive statement about being on the terrace for the moonrise, but Lawrie felt that Penelope would be there waiting, and that he must not disappoint her after that half-mile walk in the dark.

He untied the boat, stepped in and was feeling his way to the rowlocks when he felt a slight lurching of the craft as Kid stepped in behind him. Lawrie gripped an oar and crouched, ready for battle.

But Kid did not launch himself forward, as Lawrie expected. Instead, he seated himself in the stern, exactly as if his presence were a part of Lawrie's plan.

"'Course, I don't put much faith in this night huntin'," he said casually, while Lawrie glared at him through the gloom. "But I'm willin' to make a try at it, seein' you're bound to hunt deer by moonlight. I'd 'a' went last night if I hadn't

been laid out with that sick headache. Lead on, old-timer. You're a better hand at rowin' than I am."

For the first time in his life Lawrie knew how a man must feel who kills in a blind rage. He felt the weight of the oar in his hands and calculated his chance of getting in a blow before Kid could draw and shoot. But in the few seconds while he hesitated, Kid shifted the rifle he carried so that its muzzle pointed in Lawrie's direction.

Carelessly though it was done, seemingly an unthinking movement while he settled himself comfortably in the stern, the action halted Lawrie just as he was gathering himself for a spring. He felt a cold shiver run up his spine as he sat down and pushed off to where the whispering wavelets played along the boat's side and the slow sweeping of the river started them downstream before the oars had dipped into the water.

"Lightfoot, you sure are a bullheaded cuss," Kid complained, when they were straightened out and sliding swiftly down past the island. "I told you the river ain't safe, down below here. Won't take my word for nothin', will yuh?"

For answer, Lawrie merely grunted. A wild plan had come into his mind, and he was turning it over and trying to judge its feasibility. Its very simplicity seemed to promise success, if he could

locate the canyon where the deer had come down and taken to the water.

Briefly, he meant to entice Kid on to the mainland (which he could do by seeming awkward and swinging the boat around so that the stern would first touch shore), and then back off and leave him there, taking his chance of being shot while yet close in shore. But the light was all in his favor. Without his horse Kid would never attempt to swim back to the island, and unless he swam the river he would be compelled to stay on the mainland.

The more he thought of it, the more the plan appealed to Lawrie. The only difficulty was in finding that narrow gorge before the moon came up. To make sure of it he turned the boat and rowed stern first — a proceeding which made his contemplated ruse seem the most natural thing in the world. If Kid questioned him, he was ready with the explanation that he was watching for a landmark, which would be a part of the truth.

But Kid made no comment. He sat humped in the stern, his hands grasping the boat, his eyes fixed upon the island shore which they were following. For once, Kid seemed completely off guard.

As they neared the point of the island, Lawrie

held the oars poised while he gazed up at the bank, looking for a certain dead tree near which his horse had been standing when the deer came down the canyon. With that tree for a marker, he thought he could get the angle and be sure of coming within a few rods of the gorges across the river.

All at once the boat careened on its side, and Lawrie found himself pitched frogwise into the river. He gave a great flop and came up, to find Kid's head bobbing on the surface, not far away. As he treaded water while he got his bearings, he saw Kid turn and make for the shore, swimming downstream at a rate that would bring him out rather dangerously close to the sand bar.

With one glance Lawrie noted direction and danger before he lunged after the boat. The oars were floating blandly down the river, but he could make oars without much trouble; the boat was a different matter, and he did not want to lose it.

Now he blessed the home-town gang that had taught him to swim by the drastic method of upsetting the boat he was in, and yelling to him that he must help save the boat or they would drown him. He never had been drowned, and he had saved that old boat more times than he could remember. The training had become a matter of

instinct. Now, he got the rope in his teeth and started swimming upstream instead of down, as Kid had done; harder work, but it brought him under the bank where he could catch an overhanging bush and tie the boat securely before he crawled out. The final work must wait for daylight.

As he scrambled up through the bushes, the killing rage he had felt when Kid stepped into the boat surged again through his blood and blotted out sober reasoning as a storm cloud blots out the sun. Kid had purposely upset the boat; Lawrie knew that trick of old. He ought to have suspected the intention when he saw how Kid sat leaning forward, gripping the edge of the boat on either side. Probably Kid thought that just because Lawrie was a tenderfoot he could not swim.

"And I hope to heaven he drowns!" Lawrie cried aloud, venting his fury in words. "I hope he mires in the quicksand——"

His heart leaped oddly, choking the words in his throat. From the sand bar had come a shout, shrill with terror. It was as if Lawrie had prayed and in the same breath heard the answer. It was not with cold that he shivered, though his teeth began to chatter.

"Well, that settles *his* hash!" he muttered,

grasping at his mood of a moment ago. "Ten minutes, Stilson said——"

"Lightfoot! For God's sake!"

Lawrie started running, tearing his way through the bushes tangled with vines. He thought he was running toward home, away from the sound of that voice, but when he burst into the open he found himself facing the river with its treacherous sand spit luminous under the bright starlight. He stopped in mid stride against the wire fence, his hands flung up against the horror being worked by that awful place.

Fifty feet away — no more than that! — Kid Kern was fighting grimly, despairingly with the sand. He was in to his hips. He looked, thought Lawrie, like a man whose legs have been cut off to his body and who is trying to crawl with the help of his hands. He had taken off his coat and spread it before him and was lying flat on his stomach with his hat under his reaching hand, trying to pull his legs free of the sucking sand. But at that spot the bar was particularly malevolent, it seemed, and Kid could make no headway.

He did not call, after that last horrified outcry. He fought like a wild animal, dumbly and with a terrible persistence. But in the starlight Lawrie fancied he could see an inexorable settling

of the body, as though the coat was sinking and taking Kid with it. A coat could not help very much, he thought. What Kid needed was something firmer and with more surface. He did not know what ——

Then he thought of the bushes, and worked his hand into his soggy pocket after his knife. He did not call out to Kid; his murderous hope had so recently seared through his consciousness that a friendly hail would have sounded in his ears like a Judas greeting.

With an armful of green bushes he ran to the fence, threw his burden over and crawled through. There was still a strip of solid bank beyond the fence, and he stepped out cautiously until his toe sank into a yielding substance that clung with a suction which made him draw back with a panicky feeling of terror. He knew then how horrible it was out there for the Kid.

Even when he aimed the first willow branch he did not speak. Kid's first intimation of his presence was the swish of green branches as the bush fell a dozen feet short of the mark. Lawrie groaned and aimed another and another.

When all that bundle had been thrown as far as he could send them, there still intervened a ten-foot stretch of bare sand between Kid and safety. Lawrie ran back, slashed another bundle,

choosing the biggest, and ran to the brink, dragging the brush behind him.

There was just one thing to do, and Lawrie set his teeth for the job. He flung that bundle endwise from the bank, ran back and cut more, raced to the fence, flung them over and crawled through, and with the bushes in his arms he walked out upon the leafy bridge.

They made precarious footing at best, and he caught his breath as he felt them yield to his weight, felt the sand stealthily oozing up to grip him. But he went on, stepping lightly like the dancer he was, and when he dared go no farther he threw his load straight out at Kid and ran back to firm ground, shuddering at the ominous, sucking sound when he lifted his feet.

Not until he reached the fence did he turn, and then he saw Kid dragging branches toward him and tucking them under his body much as a hen pulls straw about her while she sits on her nest. The oddity of the likeness brought a hysterical chuckle from Lawrie's throat.

The great, imminent danger was past. He saw Kid was making little headway at pulling his legs from the quicksand, but at least he could hold himself from sinking deeper until something more could be done for him. What was needed, of course, was a rope.

He tried pulling a strand of barb wire from the fence, but the staples had been driven in flush with the tough wood and he could make no impression on them. The only thing left for him to do was to go home and get his horse and a rope. He carried another armful of brush out and flung it to Kid, retreated nervously from the springy, makeshift causeway, and started at a run on the two-mile journey up the island.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LAWRIE REBELS

"And for two cents, I'd have left you in there! You've watched me day and night; you've dogged me every step I took on the island, until I've cursed the night I pulled you out of the river! You deliberately upset that boat — thinking you'd drown me, I suppose! And when ——"

"No, you're gettin' ahead of your story, Lightfoot. I never wanted you to drown. I was purty sure you'd land about where I did. I knowed you could handle yourself in the water, from the way you got action that night me and the horse was goin' down.

"I admit I upset the boat, to save argument. You're such a bullheaded cuss. But I never intended for you to drownd. I aimed to make sure you got out all right. That hellish quicksand ——"

"Oh! You admit upsetting the boat, I see!"

"Yeah, I flopped her," Kid wearily acknowledged, closing his eyes as if their lids were weighted with lead. He had been in the sand for nearly two hours, and what with his illness of the previous night, even his iron strength had been sapped by the ordeal.

Lawrie had somehow got him home and to bed with hot coffee inside him and six blankets piled on top of him, and now his outraged soul was pouring out its resentment in all the bitter words he could call to mind. An unfair advantage to take of Kid, perhaps, though Lawrie justified himself on the ground that it was best to speak his mind now when it would not come to shooting.

"That was your rifle — I had it in the boat," Kid mumbled, without making the effort to open his eyes. "She went — to the bottom. Git you another one, some day — when you git outa here and quit snoopin'."

"Snooping? Me?" The West had done things to Lawrie's speech, whatever else it had failed to accomplish.

"Yeah — down river. Told yuh not to go. You wouldn't take the hint. You know damn' well them wasn't deer you seen. You've been stallin' with me. I hunted up that picture — with the boys' faces on wolf bodies. White wolves! You'll sure as hell think they're wolves if you ever cross their trail. I was doin' you a favor — when I turned that boat over."

"Funny kind of favor, I must say!" The ordeal had taken toll of Lawrie's nerves also, which impelled him to harp on his grievance like a pettish woman. "I suppose you think you'd be doing me

a favor by shooting me in the back, some day! You'd argue that it might save me from toothache or something. I suppose I should consider it a great sacrifice on your part, that you carried my rifle along to sink in the river, instead of your own! You thought you might need to hide behind the bushes somewhere and take a long shot at me, and you wanted your own gun handy. It wouldn't do to give me a chance for my life!"

"Damn you, shut up!" Stung out of his lethargy, Kid sat up, his black eyes ablaze with anger that dulled to agony as he sank back again, a groan forcing itself between his clenched teeth.

Lawrie's upraised fist slowly sagged to his side, while he stared at Kid's face, gone suddenly pasty and blank. Stupidly he wondered what had happened; found himself rather thankfully remembering that he had done nothing to bring that look of death to the other.

He turned away, for the third time that night gripped with the sickening realization that he had wanted to do murder, and that he had been saved from the attempt through some trivial circumstance as unexpected as it was unavoidable.

There in the boat he had not been able to strike down a man who made no show of hostility or resistance. On the river bank, after he had pulled the boat ashore, he had discovered that it was

impossible to turn his back on a man who was being sucked down to a terrible death in the sands. Now, he could kill Kid Kern very easily while he lay there unconscious. The physical effort would be slight; the chance of discovery infinitesimal. The river would carry the body away and no one could possibly guess at the truth. He would be rid of the incubus that had made life a nightmare on the island.

But even while his brain considered all these things, his feet were taking him to the water bucket. He carried the full dipper to the bed, feeling a spiteful satisfaction in the thought of dashing the contents into Kid's face. But he did nothing of the kind, because a wet pillow would be clammy discomfort afterward.

His ministrations were gentler than his thoughts, and they were not without effect, for Kid finally opened his eyes and stared dully at the ceiling where the lamp threw a shadow. After a while he turned his eyes slowly to where Lawrie sat slack-limbed in the cowhide covered lounging chair, looking at Kid with somber intentness.

"Go ahead, Lightfoot. Bump me off," Kid said, in a strained, tired voice. "My back's broke, I guess. Done it trying to pull myself outa the sand. Numb at first, but she's sure a fright now."

"Maybe," said Lawrie, "it strained your back to ride home lying across the saddle. But it was the only way I could get you here."

"No, I done it in the sand. Guess it's all off."

Lawrie stared uncomprehendingly. It had not occurred to him that Kid might be seriously injured, and his first reaction was one of shame that he had cursed a man who might be dying. Kid looked very much as a dying man would look, he thought, as he watched him helplessly.

There was no doubt that as sensation returned to his chilled limbs, Kid's suffering increased frightfully, but Lawrie could not quite believe that Kid's back was broken. It was likely to be badly sprained, however, and liniment might help that.

It was while Lawrie was ransacking all the shelves and cupboards (the walls were lined with them, and they were crowded with an amazing assortment of odds and ends), that he opened a tin tobacco box and saw, among other things, a lot of little square blue envelopes. On the first was fancifully printed the word, "VIOLIN, G." Beneath this one he found E, A, and D — a full set of violin strings safely stowed away in his cabin. For good measure the tin contained several other envelopes, with three E strings in the lot.

Now he remembered seeing a violin case among Gale Stilson's luggage, but having no especial interest in violins at the time he had not thought of it again, and certainly never had dreamed of such good luck as finding ready to his hand the strings he wanted for Penelope. The incident cheered him immensely, so that he found himself thinking almost kindly of Kid Kern, who had been indirectly responsible for the discovery.

He found the liniment on another shelf, did what he could for Kid and lay down on his bunk to wait for daylight. His rage had spent itself. He no longer wished Kid dead, though he did resent that spill into the river. Kid's explanation for the upsetting of the boat did not satisfy.

Lawrie did not believe that Kid wanted to save him from meeting the "white wolf pack." The idea was far-fetched and ridiculous, since Lawrie did not really believe that the boys he had used for his wolves were anything more than harum-scarum young fellows who delighted in making wild rides across the prairie on half-broken bronchos and in trying to achieve range fame by outshooting, outriding and outroping their neighbors.

What Kid probably had meant to do was prevent Lawrie's discovery of Penelope. He may have suspected that Lawrie had seen her the night

before, and had wanted to make sure he would not go down there again. An effective method he had used, too, Lawrie thought grimly. Very much like Kid Kern, who seemed always to avoid an open quarrel but to go covertly about accomplishing whatever he set out to do. Lawrie would have preferred open violence. It would at least show him exactly where he stood.

By daylight Kid was sleeping and his face had lost the ghastly look, so Lawrie decided that he was not hurt so badly as seemed likely last night, and rode down the island to take a look at the boat. He had this much advantage over Kid, who thought the boat had been lost.

To get the craft righted and bailed out would take some work, but Lawrie planned to do it that day, if Kid kept to his bed, so that there would be no interference. He might even be able to manufacture oars and go down the river that evening. He had a real errand now, he reflected; he had to take those violin strings to Penelope.

With that thought in the back of his mind he loped back up the island to his belated breakfast, whistling as he rode.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"THE WHITE WOLVES WILL HANG YOUR HIDE ON THE FENCE"

SUNSET again, and Scow Island lying in pastoral peace in the middle of the Missouri. Down in the meadow a cow mooed admonishingly to her calf, that thought himself old enough to wander off wherever his bovine fancy led him. In the dooryard a brown hen with one white wing clucked to her late brood of three chicks. Two mallards, glossy green necks outstretched as if their eagerness would have them at their destinations before their beating wings could bring them to the quiet eddy they sought, bored swiftly into the crimson West.

A peaceful scene, secure in its solitude. Just such a quiet hour as Lawrie had reveled in and despaired of ever putting on canvas; could revel in again, he had frequently told himself in the past few days, if only he could be rid of the incubus.

Yet here he was, standing well back from the open doorway, looking out and reveling in nothing whatever; so worried that he did not even see the flaming colors of the sky above the tree tops

to the south. He was watching the edge of the grove beyond the corral and wondering if it would not be a good plan to dress the broom in his hat and coat and push the effigy through the doorway, just to see if it would draw a shot from Kid Kern. He did not put the idea into concrete form, however, simply because the light was too strong and because he credited Kid with sufficient shrewdness to suspect the strategy.

An hour ago he would have told you that the manner of Kid Kern's departure did not matter to him, just so Kid removed himself. Now, he would have given much to see that tall, swarthily handsome guest of his walk out of the corral and up to the cabin with his hands empty and hanging at his sides. He would have been still better pleased to know that Kid was lying sick in his bunk, where he had been at noon apparently too badly hurt to sit up.

Lawrie had fed him, placed the water bucket and dipper within his reach, and had gone off on Jasper to the lower end of the island to finish his work of getting the boat into usable condition again, and of fashioning a pair of oars. There had been a good deal of brush to cut out of his way so that he could have room on the bank to work, and the bailing had taken longer than he had counted on.

Just at the last, he became uncomfortably aware of milking time and of chickens to be fed and of the injured man in the cabin. He had hurried to finish the job, had mounted Jasper almost with the easy grace of a real range man and had galloped home to find the cabin empty, Kid's horse and rifle gone, and a note on the table which read:

"Don't be a dam fool, Lightfoot; the white wolfs know you are after them and they will hang your hide on the fence if you don't watch out. Take a fool's advise and quit snuping around. It wont git you anything but a bullit in the back. So long Kid."

A second reading gave him some relief, for he saw now that Kid had probably left the island. He could make it across all right, swimming toward the mainland where the shore line in the canyon was low and made an easy landing. Just at first Lawrie had caught only the significance of that mention of a bullet in the back, and he had paid no attention to the rest of the note.

Reassured, he took up the milk bucket and started for the little pasture where the milch cow stood placidly chewing her cud while she waited beside the gate. With Kid off the island, he felt a great burden lifted from his soul — until it occurred to him that, if Kid were planning

treachery, the first thing he would do would be convince Lawrie that he had crossed over to the mainland.

The milking stopped right there, and the old cow forgot to swallow her cud, so great was her astonishment at her master's hurried retreat to the house, leaving half her milk in the udder.

But later, when he had read the note over several times and studied each line of it carefully, he again decided that Kid meant to deliver a friendly warning before he left, and that he really had crossed the river, thinking Lawrie was helpless without the boat. Which reminded Lawrie that, Kid or no Kid, he was going to take those violin strings to Penelope.

He reflected that Kid would not expect him to go down the river again, for did he not know that the boat had been saved. But why he harped on the white wolves was a mystery, unless——

"By thunder, there's nothing hurts like the truth," he said suddenly to himself. "I wonder if I just happened to step on Kid's toes with that wolf picture? I'll bet he's the head wolf himself, and he's afraid I'll find it out. Thought I was down here doing private detective work, perhaps —and that's why he watched me so thundering closely. And the way he said I knew it wasn't a band of deer I had seen swimming down the river

that night he came — well, by the black, reverberating thunder, he gave himself completely away!"

For some minutes he sat on the edge of the table beside the bucket half filled with milk, and used the brain God gave him. Suppose it was cattle instead of deer, swimming down alongside the cliff that night? He knew they must have landed around the bend on the cobbly slope of the narrow-mouthed canyon; which, he now understood very well, was the small outlet on the river of a very large basin hidden away in the Badlands.

Moreover, Penelope had told him that "the boys" had come that evening, and she had been obliged to help her adopted mother with a belated supper, and could not go to the terrace to watch the moonlight on the hills and her beloved, make-believe castle across the river.

It all fitted in, except Kid's unexpected arrival at the island. The reason for Kid's behavior was not yet apparent, but as for the swimming animals, Kid Kern himself had betrayed the truth to Lawrie.

"If he'd kept his mouth shut, I don't suppose I ever would have caught on," Lawrie concluded. "No wonder the adopted parent does not like visitors! Princess Penelope, it seems to me that

you certainly are in a worse fix than ever your namesake was, with her army of gluttonous wooers."

He picked up the scrawl Kid Kern had left on the table and read it again with a snort of derision.

"'Take a fool's advice and quit snooping around,' eh? Well, I haven't snooped yet, but I'm surely going to, from now on — and we'll see whose hide hangs on the fence, Kid Kern — with the broken back!"

The blood surged hotly into his face at the thought of how punctiliously he had waited on Kid whom he now believed had not been hurt at all. How Kid must have snickered behind Lawrie's back!

"By the great jumping jew's-harp!" he swore, springing to his feet and shaking his fist toward the bunk which Kid had occupied. "I didn't give a darn who the white wolves really were — but now, I'll hunt Kid Kern down, and take all the darn bullets in my back he's able to plant there!"

He bolted a hasty meal, got the violin strings and an extra box of cartridges for his six-shooter, with never a thought for the incongruity of the articles he put in his coat pocket, wrapped a folio of sketches and small paintings in canvas to se-

cure them against a wetting in the boat, and went out to where Jasper was picketed.

On this trip he took picket rope and iron pin, because Bud Larkin had early impressed it upon him that horses must eat now and then, and that a good horseman will go hungry himself before he will let his horse suffer. He did not know how long he might be away, but with the bunglesome oars he had made he foresaw a slow and arduous trip against the current on his way home, and he thought he would enjoy himself better if he knew that Jasper was not undergoing an enforced fast while he waited for his master.

All the way down the island he gloated over the fact that Kid, for all his astuteness, could not possibly know anything about the boat, and therefore he could not suspect that Lawrie would go down the river to-night.

The hazards of the adventure gave him a pleasurable thrill quite apart from the prospect of meeting Penelope again, though the thought of her had remained with him, persisting even in the stress of his trouble over Kid. Poor little enchanted princess, with all the music prisoned in her soul and seeking fugitive expression through the inadequate medium of a two-bit harmonica! To help her attain the realization of her dream had almost imperceptibly come to seem a duty

which destiny herself had ordained for him; else why had he chosen, on that one particular evening, to follow the moon path down the river and to follow a seemingly whimsical impulse to land wherever the moon path indicated?

Furthermore, who else in all the country was likely to appreciate the full pathos of her isolation from the career for which nature had evidently fashioned her soul? Not even Marge or Bud, though they would sympathize with her loneliness and think it a pity she should be shut away from young companionships.

With a certain temperamental egotism which did not reach to the surface of his nature, Lawrie felt that only one gifted with the creative imagination could fully comprehend that yearning for expression which Penelope had half unconsciously revealed to him in the naive description of her secret ambition. No, she was right; others would laugh at her. But as for him, he felt that carrying these violin strings to her was only the first step. Somehow he must help her develop her gift. It must amount almost to genius, to fill her thoughts so completely.

Abruptly he awoke from his meditations to find that he had been rowing for dear life straight toward the terrace, and that the bulk of the boulder-piled cliff-side had stolen up out of the star-

light until now it loomed just ahead of the boat. He had not meant to make such haste, but instead to study the shore line and see exactly where it was that the swimming cattle must have landed. It was too late for that now, for he had passed the spot, keeping well out in the middle of the river and thus cutting straight across the bend before the island.

Slightly chagrined at his preoccupation over the girl, he shipped one oar and stood up, cautiously sculling in with the other to a safe landing. Some protective instinct had surely warned him, else he would have smashed into a nest of jagged rocks that lay like huge, wolfish teeth barely above the water.

The terrace, when he finally succeeded in climbing to its level, was dark and silent; a bit windy too, he noticed as he stood beside the narrow ledge where Penelope had sat. He was obliged to button up his coat and to turn up the collar to shut out the chill of the evening. Not a particularly auspicious time for Schubert's "Serenade" by moonlight; he could fancy Penelope playing it with chattering teeth and fingers numb with the cold, and he laughed in spite of himself. Even genius must yield to the chill of a raw September wind blowing straight off the river, and Lawrie, with his portfolio under his arm

and his coat buttoned to his chin, felt rather foolish waiting there on the terrace a full hour before moonrise.

He put the folder of pictures on the ledge and weighted it with a rock, and began looking for the path Penelope had told him led down to the valley. When he found it, he set out for the house, going carefully in the faint light of the stars, never sure that he was taking the right trail. But it seemed the only possible route by which one could travel back from the river and he kept going. So far as he could determine there was no path at all, but merely a line of least resistance; a ledge here, an opening there between huge boulders, a thin spot in a brush-covered slope.

A half mile, Penelope had said, but he seemed to have gone much farther than that. He began to think he was lost, when he saw the twinkle of a light like a fallen star, some distance below him and away off to the left. The dim trail did not seem to lean that way at all, so he struck out along the steep slope on a course of his own devising, which at least had the advantage of leading straight in the direction of the light.

"Penelope never came this way, and I'd bet on that!" Lawrie grunted, as he tobogganed down a forty-foot shale bank just above the light. Tons

of small, flat pieces of rock accompanied him, followed him, rattled about his feet as he picked himself up. Though he had stopped falling the shale had not, and Lawrie started frantically digging for his hat, which had jarred from his head as he rolled over at the bottom of the slide.

He was on all fours, dodging the sliding rocks while he pawed amongst the rubble, when he heard a familiar, quiet laugh behind him.

"Here's your hat, Lightfoot, if that's what you're lookin' for."

Lawrie got up and stood blankly staring at Kid Kern and two others who hemmed him in against the shale slide.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IN THE WHITE WOLVES' DEN

"YEAH, here's your hat, but don't be in no hurry to go!" It was Mark Hanley who pressed closer, a sinister undernote in his bantering tone. "I'll bet yuh started out to hunt white wolves, an' got lost!"

"Why, hello, Mark." Lawrie carefully repressed any sign of the astonishment he felt at the encounter. It was on the tip of his tongue to say to Kid Kern that he had read his note and was not at all surprised to meet him here, and to add something sarcastic about hanging hides on fences. But as once before, he closed his lips on the words that would have betrayed Kid's visit to the island. Why?

Lawrie wondered what it was that stayed that speech. Perhaps it was an old adage which his mother had taught him, that silence seldom harms any one, though hasty speech works much mischief; whatever that was, he held his tongue and let the others do the talking.

"Right this way," Mark invited with grim hospitality, and Lawrie followed him, Kid and the other man bringing up the rear.

It appeared that he had fallen almost into the dooryard of the cabin, the window being at the other end and leaving this side dark, though the rising moon was already lighting the hill tops. It was not until they were inside that he recognized the third man as Ring Lacey, who had been working for the Prossers all summer and had ridden over to the Meadowlark nearly every Sunday; to see Marge, Lawrie suspected, though Lacey had made no open acknowledgment that Marge was the attraction.

The three had been playing cards, with a bottle of whisky in the center of the table near the lantern. Mark very punctiliously pushed an overcoat off a bench and with a gesture invited Lawrie to sit down.

"Well," he said, "I s'pose you're waitin' to hear us howl. Didn't put me in that pitcher—didn't think I was a wolf, hunh?"

"Why," grinned Lawrie, still suppressing his astonishment, "you see, Mark, you were one of the wolves in the background. Sneaking back in the dark, you remember."

Mark grinned in sickly fashion, showing the shot had landed.

"Well, I'm right up in the front row now, and it's you that'll kinda wish you could sneak off in the dark. Always knowed yuh for a

damn' snoopin' coward. You'd 'a' sprung the hull thing on Bud and Lark if you'd had the nerve of a rabbit."

"How do you know," retorted Lawrie, "that I didn't?"

Mark's jaw sagged, pulling his mouth slightly open. His protruding, light-blue eyes seemed to pop farther out of his head.

"You don't suppose they're going to run to you and tell you they know you're a thief and that they're watching until they can catch you in the act, do you?"

"Hell, is *that* why Bud didn't want t' talk about them wolf pitchers! Or Lark, either! Say, Lightfoot, hangin's too good for yuh!"

"Yeah, you're dead right!" Ring Lacey harshly agreed.

"Dirtiest, low-down trick I ever seen in m' life!" Mark went on with the indictment. "Took a cur like you to think of it. Wouldn't come right out an' accuse a feller to his face an' give him a chanct to defend himself — no, you had to go an' paint a pitcher of a bunch uh wolves roundin' up calves! Had to make 'em white, so'st anybody that seen it would know there was some darn catch in it. That wasn't enough, so yuh had to go an' draw a pitcher with the boys' faces onto the wolves — only yuh never dast to draw *my*

face on; yuh knowed damn' well I'd 'a' killed yuh right there!

"No, yuh had to go at it under-handed an' sneakin'. Thought I'd tip my hand, mebby! I was right there where I could call yuh, an' the rest of the boys wasn't, that's why! Put Ring, here, onto a wolf — but yuh dassent put *me* on, yuh ——"

"Yes, that's all right for a cussing," Kid interrupted, when Mark had run nearly to the limit of his blasphemous vocabulary. "But what I'd like to know, Lightfoot, is how in the devil you trailed me here. Slick work — I got to hand it to yuh. For a tenderfoot you're about the slickest proposition, Lightfoot, I ever run acrost in my life. How'd yuh do it?"

"Aw, he's about as much of a tenderfoot as I am!" Ring Lacey suddenly and ironically declared. "He's a stock detective, that's what. We might 'a' knowed it, if we hadn't been havin' such bullheaded luck we was plumb blind."

"No, he ain't no stock inspector," Mark contradicted. "I know that breed to a fare-ye-well. He ain't nothin' but a damn' nosey cuss that's run up against a snag, that's all. Thinks he'll play hell an' git a stand-in with some cow baron by sneakin' around and findin' out who's gittin' away with so many cows an' calves. An' then

he's got to show what a smart boy he is, so he tells his little story by makin' it into a pitcher an' showin' that around. Ain't got nerve enough to come right out an' *say* it — no, he's got to hint around. White wolves! Hunh! I'll white-wolf yuh ——"

"Now, hold on a minute, Mark!" Kid Kern calmly put out a hand that nevertheless fell upon Mark's shoulder with a steely grip. "What's the use of beating him up? That don't change nothing, does it? Chances are, he's acting for the Meadowlark right now, and they know just about where he's at and where to look for him if he don't show up." His black eyes fixed themselves steadily upon Lawrie with a look which that young man would have given much to read.

"You know, Mark, you haven't been with the Meddalark for ten days or so. That sickness of yours looked pretty slick at the time, but it sure fixed things so you don't know what's been goin' on. Chances are, Lightfoot's been right there all the while — or, anyway, in close touch with Lark and Bud. Gettin' sick so you had to stay at the Fryin' Pan after the dance has kinda put the kibosh on your ever goin' back, don't yuh think?"

"Yeah, but where'd *you* see Lightfoot? You said he trailed yuh in here — how does that

come? You in cahoots with him?" Mark's face was red and angry as he turned on Kid.

Kid swung him about and stared into Mark's face, the pupils of his eyes mere pin-points of jet in irises but little lighter in color; a dull flame glowed now in those eyes — or so the artist in Lawrie would have described Kid's expression.

"Say that again, Mark, and say it slow," Kid softly invited. "I may have misunderstood yuh."

Mark tried to meet that inflexible look, but in spite of himself his glance shifted.

"Well, yuh never said nothin' to us fellers about seeing Lightfoot t'day," he mumbled, as he turned away and picked up the whisky bottle. "Do what yuh damn' please with 'im, Kid, only yuh know as well as I do he can't be let run; not after he's located this hide-out. Yuh got to do somethin' with 'im. I'd tie a rock to 'im an' heave 'im in the river, if I was doin' it." He drank from the bottle, two great swallows.

Kid's little mustache lifted as his lips twitched in a small, secret smile.

"All right, Mark, you take him out and drown him. It'll let me and Ring out of a bad job."

Mark moved uncomfortably away, putting the table between himself and Lawrie as he set down the bottle.

"No, yuh don't, Kid," he rejected the proposition with haste. "You ain't goin' to pin nothin' like that on *me,* an' git me hung for it. You're the ole he-wolf, you do your own drowndin'."

Kid laughed, that quiet little chuckle which had so maddened Lawrie on the island.

"That ain't the trouble, Mark," he jeered. "All that ails you is, you ain't got the nerve to drownd a mess of blind kittens. You're yeller, that's what. How about you, Ring? Think you could bump a man off without its spoilin' your sleep afterward?"

"Hell, no!" Ring lifted both hands with a fanning gesture that plainly repudiated the thought. "Say, I'm so damn' chicken-hearted I can't kill a m'skeeter without shutting my eyes. No, sir, that's outa my line completely."

Kid scowled at the two of them, sending a swift glance toward his erstwhile unwilling host.

"Well, what are you fellows goin' to do about it, then? Turn him loose to go blat all he knows?"

They looked at each other — furtive glances which Lawrie interpreted as holding all the desire of murder without the courage to bring the deed to actual accomplishment.

"Shore can't let 'im git away," Mark said morosely. "It'd mean the pen for the bunch of

us. Kid, it's up to you. Uh — you've kinda got yourself broke in to them things."

"What's that?" Kid took a menacing step toward Mark.

"Aw, I never meant nothin'. But you're the boss, Kid. It's up to you. Or Butch. Butch hates the Meddalark, anyway. Whyn't yuh turn Lightfoot over to Butch?"

"Butch ain't here. Say, you fellows talk like a couple of old maids. What you goin' to do? Here's Lightfoot, takin' it all in, and able to send us up for life, almost. What you goin' to do about it?"

"Prob'ly he don't know the way out," Mark muttered, "even if he did foller yuh in. No horse livin' could swim up agin the current, around the bend. If he could, he couldn't land — not with that jump-off at the mouth of the gorge. He'd have to swim clear up to Scow Canyon, and that's a two-day trip for a fish, I tell yuh. How'll he git away? Tell me that."

"Yeah," Ring Lacey echoed with a shade of relief. "Keep 'im here an' make 'im work! That's what I'd do with the sun-of-a-gun."

"'Course, I don't s'pose he's got any mortgage on life, no more'n the rest of us has," Mark hastened to strengthen the argument. "Somethin' might happen to 'im — you can't tell.

Lightfoot, you damn' cur dog, you know yourself you oughta be killed, by rights. If we let yuh live, the boys'll work the tar outa yuh — I hope."

Lawrie never had liked Mark Hanley; a big, overbearing, loud-mouthed lout he had privately called him, even when he had believed him loyal to his salt and as honest as the average illiterate. Now, Mark's heavy bluster which masked a vicious spite against one who knew him for a scoundrel, raised his gorge. He laughed contemptuously.

"Say, I want to tell you fellows something funny," he said. "When I painted that wolf picture I just put in you boys haphazard. I didn't think you were thieves — I only used faces that appealed to my imagination. It's quite a joke, don't you see? You thought I had the goods on you, as you say, so you've gone ahead and convinced me that you're guilty. Lord, *I* didn't know, until you told me yourselves. Just another proof that a guilty conscience needs no accuser. I was disgusted with the Meadowlark, and I left them — but I never dreamed ——"

"Yuh will now," gritted Mark, the muscles along his underjaw knotting as his face purpled with rage and the liquor he had drunk. He sidestepped the table and lunged at Lawrie, murder

in his eyes — whatever may have been in his heart.

Lawrie met him with a slashing blow that cut his own knuckles on Mark's teeth, and Mark grunted, shook his head, and came on with open arms. He was a big man, and he had long arms that could grip like a grizzly. He wanted a clinch, but Lawrie on his feet had all the light swiftness of a trained dancer, and now he bounded to one side, sending a glancing blow to Mark's ear.

Kid Kern stepped back, pulling Ring Lacey with him, and gave the two the middle of the floor. Without looking his way, Lawrie knew that Kid was smiling with that queer, inscrutable twist of the lips; but he was holding Ring off, and Lawrie had a fleeting sense of gratitude for the action.

Back and forth they fought, lurching heavily against table and stove, pushing boxes and benches about with their straining legs while they grappled. Mark was big, heavy, and a fighter of the slugging, wrestling range type. Lawrie was as tall, lighter of build, gym taught and quicker on his feet, thanks to his very creditable work in a University vaudeville team which had gone in for solo dancing.

How it would have ended no one ever knew, for they were making even work of it and would

probably have lasted until they wrecked the cabin. But Ring Lacey had stealthily drawn his gun and when the two surged toward him, shuffling Kid aside with their heaving shoulders, Ring lifted his gun and brought the barrel down with a vicious smash on Lawrie's head.

He went limp as a rag in Mark's arms, and Mark showed his real nature by driving his fist into the blanched face against his shoulder. Then he dropped him with a kick, and lifted investigative fingers to his bleeding lips.

"Chicken-hearted, you two!" snarled Kid, darting a furious glance from one to the other. "You wouldn't have the heart to kill a man — oh, no!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KID HAS A HEART-TO-HEART TALK WITH LAWRIE

WITH a great buzzing in his head Lawrie gradually came back to consciousness of his immediate surroundings. He found that he was lying beside a faint trail at the top of a steep slope rising precipitously from the river, with the whisper of running water below him and the moon swimming through a purple, star-flecked void above him. The little breeze that had been so keen on the terrace now bit like a knife edge against his face, wafting into his nostrils the odor of cigarette smoke which was his first intimation that he was not alone. He dug elbows into the ground and managed to sit up, feeling insufferably groggy. As he sat there with his face cupped in his palms, he began to suspect that a considerable portion of the events in the cabin had been sliced from his consciousness, making room for an intolerable ache in his temples.

"That's the ticket," Kid Kern's voice drawled approvingly. "I kinda thought the fresh air would bring yuh out of it. Think you'll be able to travel now, Lightfoot?"

"I might — if I had the chance," Lawrie re-

torted acrimoniously. "The way I feel—what happened to Mark?"

Kid Kern chuckled under his breath, involuntarily, as if into the midst of a deplorable situation the question shot an incongruous note of humor.

"You're the guy that had it happen. Ring Lacey crowned yuh with his gun. You went out like blowin' out a lamp. Crawl over here behind this rock and wait a minute, Lightfoot. I got somethin' to do, then I want to have a heart-to-heart talk with yuh."

Without trying to think of the why or wherefore, Lawrie did as he was told. The spot indicated by Kid was sheltered from the wind, and he crawled into it thankfully. He needed a little time to clear his head from the roaring dizziness that assailed him at intervals and pull himself together for the next emergency, which he dimly felt was close upon him.

Sitting there feeling tenderly of the lump on his head, Lawrie witnessed an odd performance. Kid stood up, gazed fixedly back along the trail for a minute or two, then stooped and strained at a rock four or five times as big as his head; dislodged it from its shallow bed of earth and with a mighty heave rolled it down the steep slope and into the river. The splash it made

tingled along Lawrie's nerves — perhaps because of the conversation he had been forced to overhear in the cabin. He remembered the discussion well enough, and he knew just what that splash was supposed to represent.

"You set still, Lightfoot," Kid muttered commandingly, turning toward him. "I'll be back in a minute."

He disappeared down the trail, and Lawrie heard the mumble of voices. The sound ceased, and Kid came back swearing softly to himself.

"Talk about yellow-livered coyotes! Them two sure is the limit," he exclaimed in an undertone, sitting down beside Lawrie and beginning the mechanical process of rolling a cigarette. "That rock was supposed to be you. The boys packed yuh over here by the river to make a finish of the job, but they never had the nerve to heave yuh into the water. They beat it back outa sight, so they could swear they never seen what become of yuh, and waited for me to do the dirty work for 'em. They think they heard somethin', and they ast me to set here a while and watch to see yuh don't crawl out on the rocks and make a git-away.

"The damn' cur-dogs have high-tailed it fer camp, and if they was hauled before a jury they'd both of 'em swear they never had a hand in no

murder, never seen yuh down in here and never knowed where I was or what I done to-night. They'd stand by and see me strung up before they'd ever own up that it was their idee in the first place to throw yuh into the river, but that they failed to go through with the scheme because they're both damn' cowards. Hell, I'd have more respect for 'em if they'd went through with it — or tried to, anyway."

Lawrie looked up from between his two hands pressed against his temples.

"Will you please tell me why you didn't go through with this lovely plan yourself?" he asked with much sarcasm.

Kid finished and lighted his cigarette before he made any attempt to reply.

"Recollect, Lightfoot, you done me a few little favors — like haulin' me and my horse outa the river, and workin' like hell to git me outa the quicksand, and takin' care of me like a baby when I was sick. I'd be lower 'n a snake in a forty-foot well if I didn't remember them things. It ain't hardly likely, is it, that I'd drowned yuh like a cat that gits in the cupboard? Use some sense!"

Lawrie felt his bruises and said nothing. In truth, he needed a little time to readjust his opinion of Kid Kern and to digest the discovery

that Kid was after all rather human in his reactions, in spite of his cold-blooded manner of conducting his affairs.

"This snoopin' and spyin' around is damn' dangerous, Lightfoot," Kid remarked after a pause. "I don't aim to be mean about it, but I can't see what business it is of yours, who's white wolves and who ain't. I knowed all the time you'd git yourself in trouble if you come trailin' down river trying to find out something that never concerned yuh nohow."

"I didn't try to do anything of the kind!" Lawrie doggedly denied the charge. "You fellows make me tired! You must have brains made of sole leather. I told you I was merely romancing when I painted that picture, and I never dreamed I was hitting so close home with the truth. I was merely trying to help Marge get the working idea of a story. If the shoe happened to pinch, I can't help it, can I?"

"Yeah, that's all right. I could maybe believe yuh, Lightfoot, if yuh hadn't come sneakin' down here right on my trail. You was s'posed to be on the island mindin' your own business. I give yuh fair warnin', and if you never meant nothing, and didn't care a darn who was rustlin' calves, you'd 'a' stayed where yuh belonged. No, Lightfoot, that story don't jibe."

"I don't see why not. It's quite true, I assure you. I certainly didn't come down the river to find out what I could about the 'white wolf pack'." Lawrie spoke sharply, impatient with the argument which seemed to him altogether futile. His head ached and he wanted to see Penelope before he went home — if it was his lucky chance to see Scow Island again.

"If it wasn't to find that out, then what the devil did yuh come for?"

"To see — to explore around a little. The moonlight on these hills — oh, thunder! I didn't know the Missouri River was private property!"

Kid leaned closer, peering so sharply into Lawrie's face that in spite of himself Lawrie flushed and turned his face away.

"On the square, Lightfoot, did you think them was deer you seen swimmin' down river?"

"Why, of course I thought they were deer! They looked like deer and they sounded like deer, and from the way the coyotes were yapping over on this side I knew deer would take to the water — what else could I think?"

Kid studied him further.

"Well, there's deer down in these Badlands; plenty of them. I guess prob'ly it could have been deer, all right. You stick to that, Lightfoot. There's another thing that sticks in my crop.

What was you doin' on Scow Island, if you wasn't tryin' to hunt down them 'white wolves' of yourn?"

"I've a perfect right to be on Scow Island the rest of my life if I want to stay there," Lawrie retorted.

"Maybe," drawled Kid. "And then again —"

"Oh, shut up your maybeing! It's my island, I tell you. I bought the whole thing, cattle and all, from Gale Stilson. I did think I could be left alone there for a day or two at least."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I wanted to paint pictures and study the scenery and get somewhere with my art, and the cattle would make me a fair living while I was doing it. An island in the middle of the river sounded like seclusion. But," he added with biting sarcasm, "I was mistaken, it seems. There's not a place on earth where a man can be left alone to live his life as he pleases.

"They nearly drove me crazy at the Meadowlark, so I packed up and left. Then I bought Scow Island — but I hadn't been there much more than a week until you came butting in and camped down to watch and spy — just as if it's a crime for a man to want to be left alone! I'd thank the world to mind its own business and leave me to mind mine!"

"You'd oughta told me all this before," Kid softly reproached him after a silence. "Us fellers ain't used to artists. You carry a strange brand, boy; one hard to read. But to come back to the point of the argument: Just how much do you know about these white wolves, as you call 'em? Come clean, because this ain't any time for foolin'."

"I'm not fooling," said Lawrie, almost as ill-naturedly as he felt — the ache in his head having pitched the key for his sharpened voice. "All I know about white wolves is what you blabbing idiots have told me yourselves. I was just painting a picture for Marge, I tell you. If you'd all kept your mouths shut I never would have dreamed I was hitting unpleasantly close to the truth. I knew, of course, that there was a lot of rustling going on; the boys at the Meadowlark talked more or less about it. But I had no notion of who was doing the stealing, any more than the rest had. It was the way the boys all jumped on me about it that made me sore, so I wouldn't explain about the picture. Then you came along and gave yourself away. That's all I know about it."

Kid's eyes, as the moonlight revealed them, held an odd, half-amused, half-startled gleam.

"That's one on me, Lightfoot. But then, yuh

never want to believe anything yuh hear, and only half of what yuh see. Putting it on that basis, we've been joshing yuh about us being white wolves. Lying to tenderfeet like you is one of our pet pastimes. So you see, Lightfoot, you don't know such a hell of a lot, after all!

"Way it all come up, Tony was tellin' us over at the dance how you put the boys into that picture, and how mad yuh got when he jumped yuh about it. I just had to josh yuh a little, Lightfoot, when I seen how touchy you was on the subject. That's all.

"Mark and Ring, they kinda took it to heart, I guess, but I sure never thought Mark would go as far as he did. That's the worst about Mark — he can't hold his temper, and he got pretty mad before he was through. And you got to admit, Lightfoot, it did look kinda bad, you droppin' down on us so sudden. Looked pretty blamed fishy for an accident."

"I can't help how it looked. I never dreamed I'd find the bunch of you there. I hadn't any plan. I was just ——"

"Admiring the moonlight. I know — I s'pose an artist would want to make darn sure it was the same moon that shines down on Scow Island!"

"It's no fishier than that Mark Hanley was

joking about how I mustn't leave here alive, and how ——"

"Well, Mark's jealous. He took it that you was down here to see Penny Lundy ——" Kid stopped as though the idea had suddenly struck him as a possible explanation of Lawrie's invasion. He leaned and stared searchingly into Lawrie's eyes which met his gaze with a defiance in itself a betrayal.

"Lightfoot, on the square now and no kiddin' — did yuh come to see Penny?"

"That," snapped Lawrie, "is none of your damned business!"

Kid whistled under his breath, examined his cigarette, flicked off a bit of ash and smoked for three silent minutes.

"Well, that's a horse of another color!" he finally observed in the tone of one who recognizes the anti-climax and is vastly relieved at its patent harmlessness. "Why the devil didn't you say so? Now I can sabe the layout — after bein' up a tree all this while. Lightfoot, you sure are a bull-headed cuss and no foolin'.

"Well, Penny's a nice little girl, and she's a thousand miles above Mark Hanley." Kid picked up a pebble and with thumb and finger snapped it out over the bank and into the river. "If you'd waited till the moon was up, you wouldn't

'a' got lost and fell through the roof of our camp, almost. Sure beats me how yuh made it down here without a boat, but then, when a man's goin' to see a girl no damn' thing like the Missouri River is goin' to stop him!"

"You go to hell," Lawrie briefly suggested in an angry tone.

Kid laughed with the dry little chuckle of amusement which had so irritated Lawrie on the island.

"No hurry, is there? I'd like to git this thing all straight in my mind first. I know there's a sayin' that love laughs at locksmiths, but laughin' at the old Missouri is a new one on me. You never swum, and you never follered me — I'm willing to bet money on that. You'd 'a' had to kept right at my horse's tail, which you never done or I'd 'a' saw yuh. Besides, you didn't have no way of knowing I was headed for here, and if you wanted to see Penny Lundy — aw, hell! How'd yuh git down here, Lightfoot?"

"With the boat," gulped Lawrie. "I pulled it ashore with me while you were making for the sand bar. The oars floated off down river, but I made a pair that would do for a while."

"Hunh!" Kid flipped his cigarette stub down the slope. "So that's the how of it! Well, I'd use them oars aplenty, if I was you, Lightfoot.

And I'd have company down river from here — if I cared anything about Penny."

"I don't know what you're driving at," said Lawrie sullenly, "but I won't do it."

"Oh, yes, you will — or yuh won't last long. Recollect, Mark and Ring thinks you're in the river. I'd let 'em go on thinkin' that, if I was you. You take that boat and the girl and keep goin'. You'll find a preacher somewheres down river, I reckon. Here's a little weddin' present you can give Penny; gold money — couple of hundred dollars. It'll come in handy. You tell her ——"

"I'll tell her nothing, confound your impudence!"

Kid reached out swiftly and caught him by the shoulder.

"You damn' fool!" he hissed in Lawrie's ear. "I'm trying to save your life — the girl's too, maybe. You don't seem to see what you're up against. Do you think I'm settin' here chewin' the rag for *pastime?* Use the brains God give yuh — or you oughta be kicked into the river!"

With a jerk he unbuckled a gun belt and forced the weapon it held into Lawrie's hands.

"Here's your gun. It was s'posed to be pitched in after yuh. Take it, and *go*. You've got till daybreak. Beat it clear outa the country, Light-

foot, and take Penny with yuh. She's had it pretty rocky, stuck down in this God-forsaken hole with her folks — and they don't treat her none too good, either.

"Don't let sunup find yuh here — them two might git their courage up by daylight. So long, Lightfoot, and good luck."

While Lawrie stared, Kid Kern slipped around the shoulder of rock and was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"KID KERN KNOWS"

It is likely that Lawrie will never think faster than he did in the next ten minutes. In spite of the increasing lump on his head and the sundry bruises and cuts on face and hands; in spite of his animosity toward Kid Kern, Lawrie found the other's insistence biting deeper and deeper into his consciousness, taking conviction to the very stronghold of his masculine pride, which said that only a coward would run away at a time like this.

Kid had struck a shrewd blow at that youthful pride when he linked Penelope's name with danger. That, of course, put a different face on things. If Kid was in earnest — Lawrie paused over that thought and decided that Kid had meant a great deal more than he had dared put into speech. Why, he had practically placed his life — certainly his liberty — in Lawrie's power. His attempt to make Lawrie see the whole thing as a joke had been too half-hearted to do more than emphasize the truth.

Lawrie thrust out his foot and dislodged a rock which went rolling down the hill to land with a splash in the river. The sound brought him sharply to a realization of the passing minutes.

He must not be in the neighborhood by sunrise, Kid had warned him, and he must take Penelope with him, because she too would be in danger from big, brutish Mark Hanley.

He got stiffly to his feet, looking for some familiar landmark along the river bank. Thus he discovered that the terrace lay down river a scant quarter of a mile. The boulder-piled point jutting out into the water, and the flattened space above, with the hill rising sharply up to a cone-shaped peak, identified the place at a glance. Perhaps the girl would be at home, but he thought he had best make sure before he went hunting the Lundy cabin. Kid had not given him any detailed advice, probably because he believed Lawrie more familiar with the place than he actually was; he wished now that he had asked Kid to tell him just how to find the place.

The trail beside which they had been sitting swung sharply aside and descended to the basin immediately behind the ridge. He decided not to follow that trail, since it would probably bring him back to the cabin from which he had been carried not so long ago. Instead, he made his way cautiously along the edge of the high bank, climbing over and around huge blocks of stone which would have turned him back in discouragement had not Kid's warning repeated itself over

and over in his brain: "I'm trying to save your life — and the girl's, maybe. . . . Don't let sunup find you here ——" Try as he would, he could not ignore that last command nor drive it from his mind.

By risking his neck so often that he became more or less accustomed to crawling like a human fly where a slip meant a hundred-foot plunge into the river, he came at last to the landward side of the ledge which hid the terrace. It was by two daggerlike crags that he recognized the place where the blind trail led down to the broad ledge, and presently he turned a corner of moon-gilded sandstone and came out into full radiance and the presence of Penelope sitting on her rock dais with a gray-and-black plaid shawl wrapped snugly around her and his portfolio open upon her lap.

"I'm so glad you left these," she said without other greeting, looking up gravely from the fateful wolf picture. "I was sure you'd be back after them, or I'd have gone home long ago. It must be nearly midnight." Then she saw his swollen cheek and the streaks of dried blood on his temple, and her face blanched.

"Did you — did you fall on the rocks?" she asked faint-heartedly, as if she knew what his answer must be and was trying to ward off the truth, giving him the cue for a lie.

Lawrie advanced a step, looking from the picture to her face with its big, anxious eyes fixed upon him.

"Penelope," he said with earnestness that would brook no subterfuge, "what do you know about the white wolf pack?"

Penelope gave another little gasp and closed the book, holding the edges tightly together with her slim brown fingers. Her eyes defied him, but with terror hiding behind the defiance.

"What — do you mean?"

"That picture ought to tell you what I mean — though I admit I didn't mean anything when I painted it. They've had a pow-wow over me tonight, to find out what would be the best way of killing me and getting away with it. Mark Hanley and Ring Lacey — I see you know what I mean!

"They decided to drown me, but they lacked the nerve. So Kid Kern was left to do it, and he rolled a big rock into the river, and they heard the splash and went home satisfied — I hope. Then he told me to go — to get out of here before daylight."

Penelope's third gasp sounded as if some one had dashed cold water unexpectedly into her face.

"I — wish you would," she said, when she could control her breath and her lips. "Oh, if Kid

told you to go, Mr. Lawrie, you'd better do it! You — you mustn't cross him — he shot a man just last week for calling him a thief and a liar. The sheriff was looking for him, but he's going to prove self-defence if he's arrested. I heard them talking just this evening. Kid said he wasn't going on the dodge any longer, and if the sheriff had any business with him, he'd know where to find him. But they say the sheriff will never try to arrest him. Kid has too many friends — and the whole Frying Pan outfit would take up the fight.

"Just for calling him a liar and a thief, he shot a man and got on his horse and rode away as if — as if it was a coyote. I heard the boys telling how he did. If he saved you from drowning he — he must like you, Mr. Lawrie. He wasn't afraid to kill you. He just didn't want to do it, or he would have. And if he told you to get away before daylight, you'd better do it. Kid Kern never talks just — just to be talking. You must do exactly as he said."

"But he said I must take you with me, Penelope. He said you needed to get away, almost as much as I do."

"Oh!" gasped Penelope, blinking a little. "Why did he say that, I wonder?"

"He said your adopted parents don't treat you

well, and you ought to get away from here. He said you aren't safe here, because Mark Hanley——"

"That brute! I despise him! I — I'd kill him if he ever dared——"

"Would you go with me, Penelope? I can't leave you here, after what Kid said. If I go I must take you with me." Lawrie's battered countenance was very earnest as he stood before her.

"I — yes, of course I'll go," Penelope said bravely, after a moment. "Kid Kern knows." She brightened then, as certain possibilities occurred to her. "I could go somewhere and work, and study music." She was on her feet before him, with the book of pictures clasped tightly against her breast. "Oh, I can be a musician after all, Mr. Lawrie! Some day I may be able to play as well as you paint pictures!"

"But Penelope, if you go we must get married. Then no one could — could criticize your going. They'd simply say we eloped or something. Kid advised it, and he sent this along for a — a wedding present. You haven't known me long enough, and I told Kid he was showing a lot of gall, but — will you marry me, Princess Penelope?"

Penelope looked away from him, to where the make-believe castle stood grim and stark against

the farther shore. Her eyes were wide and questioning — a bit tragic too, as if she were thinking of that other Penelope's plight; perhaps wishing that she might by some means delay her answer to this strange proposal.

"Would you, Penelope?"

"I — I suppose I'd better, if Kid says I should," she told him dully.

"Oh, to the deuce with Kid!" Lawrie flared with unexpected vehemence. "You don't have to marry anybody to please Kid Kern. I asked you because I — I want you to, Penelope. It's sooner than I expected, but it had to come sooner or later, you know. You must have felt that way about it too. Meeting like this, and having so much in common ——"

Penelope looked at him, smiling wistfully with her eyes.

"I'm glad you — said that. It would be dreadful to feel I wasn't wanted, Mr. Lawrie."

"You needn't ever feel that," said Lawrie gruffly, to hide his growing embarrassment. "I — well, this is rushing things a little, but I want you to know I'd never want any one else ——"

"Neither would I," said Penelope softly, pulling her shawl up over her head in silent preparation for the start. "I wouldn't even think of such a thing — with any one else."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"SPECKLED ONES, MR. LAWRIE?"

"I'LL have to go back to the island before we can start," Lawrie said hurriedly, his inner thoughts swinging between a strong desire to take her in his arms and kiss her and an equally strong conviction that he must do nothing of the kind until he had brought her safely to civilization and a minister. Love-making, he knew, must have no place in the hazardous journey before them.

"Oh, will there be time?"

"I'll have to make time. I left Jasper on a picket rope, and I'll have to let out the chickens and pigs — turn everything loose to rustle for themselves. Then, of course, we must have food and blankets, Penelope. I've no idea how far we'll have to travel in the boat before we come to a settlement or town, or even a ranch where we could stop and get things. This broken country extends so far ——"

"Glasgow is the nearest place that I know of," said Penelope, in a shaky voice that was trying hard to sound practical and wholly unconcerned. "It must be at least two hundred miles, the way the river winds around through the hills. I suppose it will take ages in a rowboat. But of course

we'll be going downstream, and that will help a lot."

Lawrie was staring down at the shimmering water that went slipping away into the hills, all silver and black with the moon and the shadows they made. He looked at the girl, troubled with vague foreboding.

"There must be some other way out of here," he said worriedly. "Don't you know of some way besides the river? The rustlers don't leave the way they come in, I know that much."

Penelope pointed to the farther shore, its water line hidden in shade.

"They swim the cattle across to that point," she said, "but I don't know where they go from there. There's another camp across there, where some of the men stay and keep watch from that side, and take the cattle on to wherever it is they sell them. We couldn't go over there, Mr. Lawrie. They'd bring us right back here — and then I don't know what would happen."

"But they spoke of some trail out. They said I'd never find it."

"And it's just as well you can't," she told him. "I don't know it myself, but if I did I wouldn't dare try it. Some of the boys would see us, sure. No, it will have to be down river in the boat, just as Kid said. You'd better hurry, if

you're sure you must go to the island before we start. If I were you, Mr. Lawrie, I'd put three or four hens in a box, so we could have fresh meat on the way; eggs, too, maybe. And bring plenty of flour and salt and beans and pork, if you have any. I may be able to help out with something, but I'm not sure."

"Too bad we can't bring a cow, so we'll have fresh milk," grinned Lawrie; a crooked grin because of his cut and swollen lip. "All right, I'll fill the boat with grub. The hen idea is a good one, only I think some young speckled roosters to broil would be——"

"Why speckled, particularly?" Penelope's laugh was tremulous, though determined to be all mirth and no tears.

"We'll argue that point after we're started. Meet me here in two hours, Penelope, and bring some warm clothes and your violin. At least we can have music on the way, for I have a pocket full of violin strings."

While she was exclaiming over that miracle of good fortune he left her, remembering uneasily Kid Kern's parting admonition that he must be gone by daybreak.

A hundred fears assailed him now that he was actually committed to the journey. How did he know, or how did Kid know that there were no

rapids farther down that dark and treacherous stream? He remembered vaguely the hazards of steamboat travel up the Missouri, especially through these Badlands; tricky currents that would sweep a small boat inexorably against sand bars or into whirlpools with jagged rocks in the center, to tear a boat in splinters.

Was this some obscure plan to do away with them both? It might be that Kid Kern wanted only to rid himself of the two persons who might betray him and his gang to the sheriff. Lawrie remembered certain rash threats which he had made to Kid; threats which he had been rather proud of at the time, but which now filled him with misgivings.

He rowed wide of the bend which held the mysterious landing, and tried to silence the clumsy working of his oars. He did not know just how far the cabin was from the river, but it seemed to him that the sound of his rowing must carry far, with the breeze blowing downstream, and while he did not really believe that Kid Kern himself had planned his death and that of Penelope, he could not bring himself to trust that strange, contradictory young man overmuch. It was with a distinct feeling of relief that he put the point of rock between his boat and the narrow mouth of the hidden basin.

Jasper was feeding placidly in the moonlight when Lawrie landed. There his judgment turned vacillating for a few minutes. It would be much quicker to mount the horse and gallop up the island — but on the other hand, he could load the boat with more provisions for their comfort if he had it up at the landing. With a sigh for the work ahead of him, he unsaddled Jasper, gave the horse a slap on the rump, and saw him go trotting off to join the cows at the upper end of the meadow. Then he clambered down the steep bank and got into the boat and took up the oars for the pull up along the island shore.

At any rate he need not worry about noise, he told himself dourly, and set himself for hard rowing. Penelope was down there in that den of wolves — the thought of her now drove other possible mischances from his mind. Even the unknown terrors of the river as it flowed through the Badlands faded from his thoughts, and the urgent need of taking Penelope away impelled him to redoubled efforts at speed. Perspiration streamed down his cheeks and dripped from his chin, when he brushed aside the branches of the tree which overhung the landing, and knew that he was at home. Driven though he was with nervous haste, he knew that he had not been long.

Nor was he long in freeing the animals and

loading the boat with what he considered necessary on the voyage. The boys of the Meadowlark would have chortled with glee at some of the things he took, and they would have indulged in a great deal of loud comment had certain omissions been brought to their attention. But on the whole and considering the stress of the moment, Lawrie showed a remarkably keen realization of the uncertainties of the journey at least. As when he carefully stowed in his pocket a dog-eared pamphlet entitled, "What to Do in Case of Drowning and Twenty Other Accidents." The Meadowlark boys would have enjoyed that.

With a low moon at their backs and a grotesque black caricature of their loaded boat sliding before them, they stole down the darkling current an hour before dawn.

Getting Penelope and her huddled belongings down that bold, rocky bluff had not been simple, especially since the moon shone from the wrong quarter and painted black streaks and patches of shade down which they must feel their way inch by inch. The descent was not made simpler by Penelope, who insisted upon carrying her beloved violin in her arms like a baby, wrapped in a quilt.

Two intrepid pioneers were they, slipping into an unknown world of towering peaks and fear-

some gorges; winding, twisting, and doubling back upon their course, borne irresistibly on the broad, cold breast of the Missouri.

In the stern Penelope sat with her quilt-wrapped violin carefully supported by her trembling knees — for the night had taken on a nipping chill to greet the dawn — and with her plaid shawl hooded over her head. Like a slim, pale little squaw, thought Lawrie, and stole frequent glances at her face, fixing its delicate lines in his memory so that some day he might paint the scene. In the half light her eyes shone luminous as fairy pools, a thousand mysteries prisoned within their depths. But when at last she spoke, her words were eminently practical; studiedly so, one who knew her well would have said.

"Did you remember to bring matches, Mr. Lawrie?"

"Six boxes. Since I don't smoke, that ought to see us through, just for campfires and cooking."

Silence for five minutes, and then the small, brave voice again:

"How many chickens did you bring, Mr. Lawrie?"

"Six or seven. This box behind me is full of chickens. I started to count them but the confounded things got excited, and some flopped out

of the box after I had them in. Started flying all over the chicken house and squawking — you'd think I was a wildcat raiding the roost! "

" I don t suppose it matters to them what throat they go down, poor things — just so they're swallowed."

" Maybe not. I know some of them are shy some feathers, because I swallowed a lot."

" S-speckled ones, Mr. Lawrie? "

" How the deuce could I tell, in the dark? "

" I don't know," said the meek voice from the hooded shawl. " I thought you'd make sure they were speckled, Mr. Lawrie."

" Penelope, I wish you'd leave off that mister."

" Well, if you really want me to — only it doesn't seem respectful to call you by your first name, and I never heard what your last name is, Mr. — Lawrie."

" Brunelle," said Lawrie, glancing over his shoulder and pulling hard on one oar to go wide of an ominous dark spot on the current.

" Oh. Is it French? "

" No. Iowa."

Silence, while Lawrie rowed steadily, glancing often behind him. Then, as the river broadened and the current became correspondingly subdued:

" Turn around, Penelope, and watch the moon slide down behind our enchanted castle. Could

anything be finer? Darned paintable, that. Some day I mean to put it on canvas — if I can."

"I feel," said Penelope in a hushed tone while she gazed, "as if I could almost play it!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

KID PAYS A DEBT

SEVERAL miles above Glasgow (which is between Milk River on the north and the Missouri on the south) their boat crept around a high point and into a little cove rimmed round with bushes tangled upon the bank. Eyes dulled with fatigue, Lawrie glanced behind without breaking the mechanical rhythm of his toil: clumsy oars dipping, rising all wet and shining in the chill sunlight, poising a second before they reached back and took another bite at the slack water close inshore.

Huddled in the stern, with her shawl over her head and pinned tightly under her chin for warmth, Penelope sat staring patiently ahead, always hoping to see some sign of the town which was their destination; a wisp of smoke perhaps, or the roar of a through train — anything to show that they had won through the wilderness and were nearing the homes of men, with shelter and warmth and food served on tables with white linen and silver and sweets. Penelope's thoughts dwelt hungrily on warm doughnuts and mince pie and jelly cake.

As for Lawrie, his thoughts were things he

could not share with Penelope just yet. They had to do with ways and means of making Penelope happy. They concerned themselves with marriage licenses and ministers and home-making, which required careful thought.

Penelope moved abruptly, one hand going out instinctively to grasp the side of the boat. She caught her breath in the little gasp which Lawrie had come to understand as well as speech.

"What is it, Penelope? Is the darn town in sight?"

"No-o — not yet. It's — it's Kid Kern, Lawrie. He's waving his hat for you to pull in and land. I — I think you'd better do it. He might ——"

"*Now* what's wrong!" Lawrie turned aching shoulders so that he might look. "He doesn't seem to have the drop on us. You look, Penelope. Can you see any sign of a gun?"

"No," said Penelope, after a more careful scrutiny than Lawrie was able to bestow. "He's just waving us in to shore, and he's smiling, I think. It must be all right, Lawrie. He looks friendly."

With a sharp glance at her face, which had brightened at sight of a friendly looking outlaw — just to show how eager she was for the end of the voyage — the weary oarsman set his strength

upon one unwieldy oar while he trailed the other, and headed the boat's nose to the bank.

"You folks made good time," Kid greeted them, risking wet feet to grab the bow and draw the clumsy craft alongside the bank. "Didn't hardly expect you'd make it in a week."

"Week?" challenged Lawrie incredulously. "I bet I've rowed a thousand miles!"

Kid's teeth gleamed white under his little black mustache as he stretched forth a gloved hand to help Penelope ashore.

"Oh, well, a fellow's always in more or less of a hurry, I guess, when he's goin' to get married. Here's the license all ready for yuh, Lightfoot. It's three or four days old, but it's usable. I thought you might land at night, maybe. And there's a Methodist preacher that'll marry yuh any time you show up."

Standing bent like an old man on the bank, Lawrie rubbed the circulation into his cramped fingers while he eyed Kid.

"That's very good of you. I was wondering about the license. I suppose we aren't very far from town, then."

"Not so far as you was. If you was a crow you could make it over the hills in a few flaps. I happened to be along here and saw yuh comin', so I thought you'd maybe want the license."

"We will, when we find the town. Seeing we aren't crows, how do we go from here?"

"Right on down the river a few more miles, to the ferry. You'll know it by the cable stretched across. You land there, and right close by you'll see a round-up camp. That's the Meddalark outfit. They pulled in about noon. They'll get you folks up to town, all right. It ain't so awful far, and there's plenty of horses."

"Just so I don't have to row up Milk River," said Lawrie. "I was dreading that."

"Well, come and eat, first. I got a fire. Penny looks froze."

"I've been cold so long," Penelope stated dismally, "that the ice is an inch deep on my bones!" She sent one quick, vivid glance at the oarsman. "Lawrie wouldn't even let me row to keep warm!"

"You'd have raised blisters on your hands in ten minutes," Lawrie gruffly declared, evidently recapitulating an old argument. "It was completely out of the question."

"You can leave it at that, I guess," Kid put in with his secretive smile. "I've got a fire going, so you can thaw them icicles off your bones, Penny."

With that he led them up the shore to where the bushes grew thickest, swung in close against

the low cliff, stepping on slabs of rock; painstakingly parted drooping branches with his hands and ducked under an overhanging ledge. As the two followed him — Lawrie helping Penelope before him — they found themselves facing a blanket-closed opening.

"This is how I cheat the landlords when I'm up this way," Kid observed carelessly, lifting the blanket and gesturing them inside. "I'll have to ask you folks not to say anything about it to *anybody*." He stressed the last word, looking from one to the other.

"Oh, we won't; of course we wouldn't say a word!" Penelope exclaimed, while Lawrie echoed the sentiment if not the words.

"It's handy to have a place where a fellow knows he can find blankets and grub when he's broke," Kid further explained. "I ain't always lucky at poker, and when I've shot the roll I know I can eat and sleep, anyway. If anybody found out about it, though, I wouldn't have no grub long. I'd be cleaned out by some darned hobo. Worse than coyotes, some of them."

It was a plausible speech, and Lawrie nodded while he helped Penelope off with her shawl. They were in a tidy camp, the natural conformation of the small cave cleverly made to serve a good purpose. There was a stove, and a pipe

which went up into blackness, probably letting out the smoke through some crack in the rock. At any rate the draught was good and the place was warm, the lamplight lending a homey atmosphere over which Penelope bubbled with appreciation.

"You folks had better rest up a while before you start on," Kid was saying, while he pushed the coffeepot forward and took canned corn down from a rock shelf. "No hurry. You can make camp and get saddle horses and ride straight to the preacher's, and get married by supper time, easy. Then you can go to the Montana House and ask for the two grips James Parker left there for you. Write that down, Lightfoot, so you won't forget. Feller named James Parker — he's a friend of mine — left a couple of grips at the Montana House, you to call for 'em later. Then — what was you planning on doin', Lightfoot? I mean for settin' up housekeeping."

Lawrie looked at Penelope, met her eyes for a moment, and turned to Kid with a tense line at each corner of his mouth.

"What I *want* to do is go back to Scow Island; for a year or so, at any rate. Penelope thinks it wouldn't be safe, but I don't see how it's anybody's business where we live."

"It ain't," said Kid drily. "Not a bit in the

world. You go on back to Scow Island if you want to, Lightfoot. There ain't a soul goin' to bother you for a minute. You can bank on that, Lightfoot. 'Course, I know how it is: Your stuff's all there and you feel like you ought to be on the ground to look after the stock ——"

"It's a case of have to, just about," Lawrie said, flushing sensitively at having his affairs discussed before Penelope. "I paid about all the cash I have in the world for that island and what's on it. I've a few hundred left, but not enough to do anything with. I could sell the stock, of course ——"

"I'd love to live there," cried Penelope, "if it's safe for Lawrie. But Mark Hanley ——"

"Mark Hanley," said Kid, his dark eyes fixed upon the corn he was stirring in hot bacon grease, "is outa the country. He ain't comin' back. So is Ring — they went together. All them wolves," he added, glancing obliquely at the artist, "have quit the range. They'll do their howlin' somewheres else. Them that you had tagged, I mean, Billy Prosser ain't no white wolf. You got him all wrong, Lightfoot. I ain't sayin' a word about the rest, though.

"No, you folks can go on back and live peaceful. Ain't such a bad place for a honeymoon, neither, if yuh ask me."

Involuntarily Lawrie turned his hands palm upward and stared at the broken blisters that were yet a long way from becoming callouses.

"Getting back is going to be some job," he said, and heaved a sigh. "It wasn't so bad coming down, though I rowed as hard as if I was pulling upstream. But think of bucking that Missouri current clear up to Scow Island!" He looked at Penelope and his eyes smiled. "But it will be worth it — eh, Princess?"

Kid laughed, but he did not say anything more about the plan until they were sitting on upturned boxes before a dinner which seemed to Penelope to lack nothing, even though there was no white linen or jelly cake or pie.

"No use pullin' against the current to Scow Island," he began abruptly, while he sweetened his second cup of coffee. "I know a trick worth two of that. You ketch the mornin' train for Fort Benton. Write down the name of Bill Hopper. He's a friend of mine. You'll find him in a shack right close to the old steamboat landin' — you can't miss him. You tell him your name, Lightfoot, and he'll fit yuh out with a boat. Won't cost yuh much — I done some dickerin' with him before. But don't mention my name, or tell him you seen me. Bill's good, but gabby. Just say Winnamucca sent yuh after the boat and stuff.

"Then all yuh got to do is go *down* the river, to your place. That'll be a cinch, and you oughta make it in a cat-hop or two."

"I bet I'll have some real oars," Lawrie declared with feeling.

"Yeah," grinned Kid, "I figure I owe yuh a couple pair of oars, Lightfoot. I was the cause of you losin' yours. Well, maybe you folks are kinda anxious to be on your way. You do just like I said, Lightfoot. First the preacher, then the hotel and the grips, then the train for Fort Benton and Bill Hopper's boat."

"You're wonderful!" Penelope said softly, laying a hand for a moment on his arm. "How can we ever repay you for all you've done to help us?"

"Oh, that's all right, Penny. Lightfoot paid up in advance, down on the island," Kid said carelessly. "I'd sure like to be at the weddin', but I guess you'll get tied just as good if I ain't there."

Thinking of what Penelope had told him of the deed which drove Kid down to Scow Island in the night, Lawrie did not urge him to go; though it did seem strange that Kid had dared go in and make all these preparations for them, and still would not go and see them married. Lawrie looked at Penelope, wondering if she might be the cause of Kid's sudden desire for solitude. He

need not have worried on that score. Kid Kern had other and more urgent reasons for avoiding his fellow men.

At the river's edge Lawrie turned impulsively and held out his hand.

"I take back everything I said on the island, Kid," he said impulsively. "You're a prince and I'm proud to know you."

An odd smile twitched Kid's lips as he took the proffered hand.

"Don't be too darned sure of that, Lightfoot," he said. "You ain't heard it all, yet!"

"That doesn't make any difference——"

"I ain't so sure — but don't tell 'em that you saw me, anyway."

"You needn't worry about that, Kid," Lawrie said, as he climbed in.

"Well, I wish yuh joy — both of yuh!" Kid, standing with his thumbs hooked inside his gun belt, called after them as they pushed off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"SWALLOW YOUR PRIDE AND SHAKE!"

"LAWRIE, you can't fool me one bit! You're all in, and you've simply got to let me row. It isn't far to the ferry — Kid said so."

Lawrie started like a spurred horse and bit deep with the oars, sending the boat plunging over the water like a cat leaping through new-fallen snow. The stop at Kid's hide-out had really refreshed his weary muscles; it was his mind now that went laggard to the journey's end, and for a reason which would never offer itself to Penelope.

"I'm not tired, Princess," he said, forcing a smile.

"You looked so cross when I spoke. And I must remind you, Mr. Lawrie, that there's more to smiling than just stretching your lips."

"You're very keen, Penelope."

"I've had your face in front of me for a whole week and more. I'd have to be blind not to learn to read its moods. I wish you'd tell me what's the matter. Is it something Kid Kern said — or the paper he gave you?"

Lawrie gave her an eloquent look, full of reproachful adoration.

"You know better than that, Princess Penelope."

"Well, what is it? Get it off your chest, as the boys say."

Lawrie opened his lips to tell her, closed them again, gave a vicious pull upon the homemade oars which made the crooked one break water with a splash that sprinkled Penelope's shawl in a small shower. Then, quite suddenly in the midst of his bottled silence, he broke into impulsive speech.

"I'd rather walk fifty miles than ask a favor of the Meadowlark outfit, if you must know! The way they all pitched into me about that wolf picture — and I was right about those boys, even if I didn't know it at the time! But you'd think, by Jove, I'd committed high treason! Only for you, Princess, I wouldn't go near their darned camp. I wouldn't ride one of their blamed horses if they begged me on their knees! I ——"

"Why, Lawrie lad, I'll walk, if you want me to. I'm good for five miles, if you'll let me take my time. You needn't ask favors of anybody on my account. I don't want you to, if you feel that way about it."

"You know I wouldn't let you walk to town." Lawrie's tone showed a sign of weakening.

"You know I wouldn't ride a horse that your

pride would forbid you to ride," Penelope retorted with some spirit. "I'd be nice, wouldn't I, accepting favors from folks who didn't treat you with respect! I know — they called you Lightfoot, and made fun of you just because you couldn't ride a bucking horse, and asked questions about ranch life. I never saw any of them except Mark Hanley, but if he's a fair sample ——"

"Well, I must admit Mark isn't," Lawrie said honestly. "Some of the boys I liked pretty well; Jelly, they called him, and Bud ——" His voice hung there with a lonesome note which Penelope was quick to understand. "Bud did try to take my part; I'll say that much for him. So far as Bud is concerned — and then Rosy wasn't so bad, either —— I guess," he added, after a reflective pause, "it was Mark Hanley and that big-mouthed blatherskite of a Tony Scarpa who made me the maddest."

"Well," Penelope remarked judicially, "they'd kick Mark Hanley off the ranch if they knew what he really is. But then, Kid says he's left the country anyway, so we won't see him, thank goodness."

"I'd like to just tell them that I hit it pretty close, after all, with my white wolves! I couldn't betray Kid Kern, of course; I've promised, and then he's done so much to help us out — but I'd

like to tell Tony what kind of a bedfellow he's had. I guess that would shut him up, all right!"

Penelope did not say anything for a minute, but that did not mean she was not making use of that sixth sense which women sometimes call their intuition. Lawrie was fighting a secret but very real homesickness for the Meadowlark, and he was transparently forcing his grudge to the front with bluster; trying to make it get up and walk when it was nearly dead. But because he was still pretending that it was very much alive, she must pretend with him.

"It would serve them right," she said spitefully at last, "if we walked right past their very camp with our noses in the air and never looked their way at all." And then her spirit crumpled. "Only — I'd be ashamed to have them see me this way. Could we pull in to the bank, Lawrie, and let me find a dressing room? I really can't let your bitter enemies see me like this. I'll put on my blue silk dress that was mamma's, and her hat with the ostrich tips, and kid gloves. They aren't going to laugh at you on my account, and say you picked a squaw for a wife!"

"They wouldn't laugh at you, Princess." Lawrie gazed upon her worshipfully. "You're beautiful just as you are. They aren't savages, you know."

"Well, they're your bitterest enemies."

"Oh-h — not quite that bad, I guess. Except Mark, and he isn't there any more."

"Well, I don't care. They'll see me in my best when we walk past them without looking ——"

"You can't walk to town, Penelope. I couldn't let you."

That started the discussion all over again, but Penelope noticed that Lawrie's resentment lacked some of its first bitterness; as if his dying grudge were kicking feebly in spite of his prodding.

Bud and his shadow, Billy Prosser, raced four of the other boys down to the ferry crossing and won, the goal being the first wet muzzle on a horse. Technically Billy's horse was winner, since Billy plunged into deep water in his zeal and came up minus his hat and coughing water from his lungs. Bud swung his rope, made a lucky throw and caught Billy's horse by the head just as he began making a panicky fight against the sullen current, and the two came ashore and shook themselves, Billy hiding his chagrin under a laugh.

"I take two bags of gumdrops! One for me and one for my horse," he cried triumphantly, when he could speak. "We both took the first drink!"

"Yeah, and you better trade the gumdrops in on a new hat, too!" Tony Scarpa twitted. "Mush rats is barred from this race, Bill! You're out."

"Frogs wasn't mentioned, so that puts me in," retorted Billy.

"Way Bud hauled yuh in, Bill, I'd say he had a sucker on the end of his twine," drawled Frank Gelle, as his horse nipped forward in the wet gravel, his nose reaching daintily for a taste of the Missouri River. He took a sip, then flung up his head and lunged sidewise as Lawrie's boat shot around a sharp bend and headed straight toward him. The Meadowlark boys hushed like startled frogs while they stared at the resplendent little figure sitting straight-backed in the stern, kid-gloved hands gripping the sides of the boat, sunlight glistening on the blue taffeta dress, all ruffles and lace as became a wedding gown.

Lawrie, rowing with deliberate energy to reach the ferry and have it over with, pulled a little harder on the left oar to bring him closer to a receding shore line on which his eyes were fixed with an intent gaze, as if he were seeing much more than a mark to steer by. Looking over his shoulder killed his stroke, and Lawrie was making a burst of speed. Had he looked at Penelope he would have seen her mouth and eyes fly open and

he would have been warned. But he did not look.

"Whoa-*up!*" cried a familiar, bantering voice just behind him. "What yuh tryin' to do, Lightfoot? Splinter your bow on this old hammerhead I'm ridin'?"

The boat stopped with a jar that set the little, ostrich-tipped hat slantwise on Penelope's head Lawrie recovered his balance on the rower's seat and turned. The crisis was upon him and he had no words with which to meet it. It was Tony, he discovered, who had shouted at him; Tony, who seemed to have no recollection of any trouble between them, and who was stealing frequent glances now at the dressed-up little lady in the stern of the boat, who was puckering her mouth in a fruitless effort to hold it from smiling; fruitless, because the dimples merely stood deeper in her cheeks.

"Hello, Billy," Penelope said with timid friendliness, when she caught sight of a familiar if bedraggled figure in the group.

"Hello, Penny. Uh — hello, Lightfoot," Billy greeted, as Lawrie got stiffly out of the boat and faced them.

Then Tony, the irrepressible, swung off his horse and came bowlegging up to him with outstretched hand.

"Swallow Your Pride and Shake!"

"Aw, swaller your pride and shake!" he exclaimed. "I know I licked the stuffin' out of you, Lightfoot, but I'm willin' to forgive yuh for it and I hope yuh do better next time. I take it all back — them white wolves was shore wolves, some of 'em."

Lawrie had the grace to shake hands with Tony, and the rest was easy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WHAT'S A QUARREL BETWEEN REAL FRIENDS?

ROUND-UP cooks have supper early, because it's easier to feed a hungry crew than it is to fight. Johnny's freckled face shone with perspiration and joy, because the pretty girl in the blue silk dress (Johnny had never seen any one quite so beautiful as Penelope looked that day) told him that his dried apricot pie was the most delicious food she had ever tasted in her life. She did not add that she had told Kid Kern the very same thing, that same day, about his fried corn; what Johnny didn't know would not spoil his pleasure, I suppose.

All the boys were assisting in the argument that Lawrie and Penelope should wait, and not be in a hurry to go on to Glasgow.

"Bonnie and Marge are coming out to camp," Bud told them for the third time, before he could make the words register in the clamor of voices. "I was going to clean up a little and ride on in to meet them, but they'll come, anyway. They ought to be here any time now."

"Marge? What's she doing here?"

"Oh, she and Bonnie had a lot of things they

wanted to buy, so they came on to Glasgow so as to meet the round-up here. Marge wants to see us right out on the range——"

"Oh, I see." Lawrie did, better than any of them. Marge must have her local color, come what would.

"So you and Miss Penelope can ride back with them in the buggy. There'll be plenty of room. They'll want to murder you if you don't let them go to the wedding, Lightfoot."

"Yeah, so'll the rest of us!" bellowed Tony. "Give us boys time to shave and slick up a little, and we'll all go! Gosh, the Meddalark ain't had a weddin' in the family since Hector was a pup!"

"Gimme another piece of pie," Jack Rosen implored of the cook. "I got to hurry an' ketch up my top horse for the occasion."

Penelope was laughing at them all, her cheeks very pink with excitement. Lawrie looked at her, remembered the hardships and the uncertainty of that trip down river, and yielded the point with a grin of acquiescence.

"I see Mark Hanley isn't here any more," he said to Bud, when the boys had trooped off to catch fresh horses and otherwise prepare for the event.

Bud's face sobered.

"I guess you haven't heard the latest news,

Lightfoot," he said, lowering his voice as if the shadow of shame had struck upon the Meadowlark. "Mark, it seems, was a wolf in sheep's clothing, all the time he worked for us. You ought to have put him in your picture instead of Billy. We know who the gang was, now, that has been rustling cattle down our way. Mark was in on it, and Ring Lacey, Butch Cassidy, — well, all of the Frying Pan outfit, I guess, from all I hear. We've kind of put two and two together since the train hold-up here the other day. Mark and Ring and Butch were recognized ——"

"Train hold-up?" Lawrie gasped. Penelope turned white.

"Day before yesterday, that was. They held up the westbound flyer, dynamited the express car and got away with quite a haul. Coming right after the Anderson killing, it looks now as if the bunch wanted to make one big clean-up and beat it out of the country. The story of your wolf picture spread far and fast, and men got to wondering how much you had discovered. Lightfoot, for a tenderfoot, I will say you sure started something! Billy's with me, now — a darned good kid too. No one ever accused him of being a wolf, thank God. But Ring and Jerry had to hunt cover when the talk began to grow personal, and it sort of stampeded the whole bunch, I guess."

"Did they all get away? After the hold-up, I mean." Lawrie's eyes held a startled expression, as if he were afraid to think.

"No, they didn't. Mark and Ring were shot. Ring died yesterday, and Mark can't live, they told me at the hospital. Butch and the rest got away — just who they were I don't know, but Kid Kern is supposed to have planned it. He was in bad, anyway, for the Anderson killing. The country is alive with sheriff's posses, but the boys seem to have scattered. So far as I've heard, there isn't a real clue in sight."

Bud got up from the bed roll which had served him for a seat, and stood looking up the road that led to Glasgow, his eyes shaded with his hand.

"There they come," he announced, the thrill of expectancy in his voice. "Bonnie and Marge. Say, Lightfoot, Marge is going to be one happy girl when she sees you!"

"It's exactly what I wanted for the love interest in my new story!" cried Marge, squeezing Penelope's hand as they sat three in a seat, going back to Glasgow and the wedding. "An elopement by rowboat down the Missouri —— Lawrie, after all your wild attempts to give me pointers I could use, you just stumbled on the most romantic thing I've heard of since we came to Mon-

tana. And I'll just bet you never realized it, either."

"I had plenty of other things to think of," Lawrie defended himself. "Just take a look at those two rows of blisters! Call that romantic?"

"But you don't regret them, you know you don't. You couldn't sit facing my new little sister and grudge a single crick in the back. Of course, in my story I shall have you rescue Penelope from outlaws, and flee for your lives down the broad turgid bosom of the mighty Missouri, just to make it dramatic. But the idea itself is new and romantic. And a cowboy wedding — why didn't you send for the minister and have the ceremony performed at the round-up camp? That ——"

"Oh, we aren't quite that romantic, Marge," Lawrie told her drily. "Practical people ——"

"You call yourself practical, do you?" Marge reached over and pinched his arm by way of sisterly joy in his presence. "Then tell me, will you, how you expect to get married this evening without a license? Even I know better than to ignore that little legality."

"I've got it right here," Lawrie rashly boasted, and tapped his pocket.

"Lawrie Brunelle, you never came all the way down in a boat, then! I thought it was funny —

Penelope all dressed up for the wedding, and you coming all the way from that island of yours in a rowboat!"

In the front seat with Bonnie, Bud turned and gave Lawrie one long, questioning look, glanced at Penelope's wide, startled eyes, and looked away. Lightfoot, he thought, had overlooked a bet that time. Though he could not imagine what the secret was that these two were trying to hide.

Luckily for the secret, the next few hours were crowded with the impromptu celebration which the Meadowlark boys insisted on sharing with the bewildered young bride and groom, and in the rush of events Marge forgot all about the glaring inconsistencies of Lawrie's story of their adventures. It was nearly midnight — a late hour for Glasgow in those days — when Marge and Lawrie said the last good-by in the lobby of the Montana House.

"Just as soon as you get back from your honeymoon," Marge spoke the final last word, "you've got to let me come and visit you on your island. I want to see what that part of the country is like, anyway. Is it wild?"

"No, tame!" cried Penelope, laughing to hide the nervous trembling of her lips. The man behind the register was eyeing them speculatively,

almost as if he knew who they were without hearing their names. "Good-by — Good-by!"

White-faced, she waited while Lawrie registered and paid for the room in advance, because they would take a very early train in the morning and might not find the clerk at hand. Lawrie never mentioned the name of Parker, nor did he ask for any grips. Penelope breathed free once more.

The man looked at the register, looked at them, hesitated and leaned over the desk, his eyes darting right and left — from force of habit, since they three were alone in the lobby.

"Don't yuh want them grips?" he asked guardedly.

"What grips? These two are all we have with us," Lawrie said coldly, and gathered the two last-minute purchases up in his hands.

"Oh, I thought yuh had a couple of grips stored here. My mistake." He drew a long breath as if he had just squeezed out of a tight place.

Penelope went and looked out into the hall after the man had shown them to their room and clumped down the stairs again. She saw nothing but the dim emptiness revealed by a wall lamp turned low, and with a sigh she closed the door and locked it, leaning back against it in the slump of release from a nervous tension.

"Oh, I was afraid you — but you saw how dan-

gerous it would have been, didn't you?" she whispered. "He meant to be kind — Kid, I mean — but with everybody on the watch — I wouldn't trust that man an inch. Would you, Lawrie?"

"You see I didn't, Princess. But I'm going to Fort Benton, nevertheless. Little girl, we're going straight home!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"HE'S A WOLF, BUT HE'S WHITE!"

In Fort Benton they punctiliously carried out the instructions of Kid Kern, though neither again mentioned his name. They found the shack by the old steamboat landing, and they found Bill Hopper — who certainly did not manifest any disposition to be "gabby."

Bill Hopper was a little, sandy-whiskered man who chewed tobacco with great earnestness while he looked them over.

"What yuh want?" he finally demanded.

"Winnemucca sent us for a boat," Lawrie said, as if he were repeating a password.

Bill Hopper grunted and went into the shack; came out with a key, and led the way to his boathouse.

"Guess it's all there," he said. "Got the oil on board yest'day."

As he threw open the water gate and let in the sunlight, Penelope gasped. The boat was on the ways and ready for the voyage, with "Penelope" painted on the bow and a small engine installed in the stern. Such a boat as Lawrie had vaguely dreamed of owning, some day in the distant

future — when he had sold a few pictures and become famous.

"Loaded purty heavy, but she'll ride out anything the Missouri can scare up," Bill Hopper vouchsafed, turning his quid in his cheek.

"How much — do I owe you?" Lawrie gulped. Even dickering could scarcely bring the price down where he would not feel terribly extravagant, but he prepared for the plunge.

"Nothin'. She's paid for. Ready to start, ain't yuh? S'pose you know how to run her?"

"Yes," said Lawrie, wetting dry lips.

"Git in, then. I'll shove 'er off for yuh. Everything's there — Bill Hopper does anything, he does it thorough."

Feeling a bit dazed, Lawrie obediently helped Penelope in and clambered after her. Bill Hopper stepped to his lever and launched them as easily as a duck slides off a mud bank into the water.

"Hear this is a weddin' present." Bill leaned his head out to call after them. "Wish yuh joy! S'long."

They waved friendly farewell as the boat slipped out to where the current caught it. Lawrie leaned over the engine, and presently the cheerful putt-putt-putt of the motor cut sharply into the wintry silence of the morning.

The shack door opened and a figure stood fully revealed in the opening; a figure that watched them go.

"Lawrie, look! It's Kid Kern!"

Lawrie turned, stared at the man who stood there, calmly smoking as he watched; alone, aloof, disdaining the danger of coming to wish them *bon voyage;* unreadable, as always he had been. He waved a hand negligently, and the two waved back — the girl with tears brimming over her eyelids.

"Lawrie, it's because he's unhappy and — and lonesome, that he came! He wanted to see us — go off happy, because he can't. Oh, what a pity!" She crept over and slipped her hand inside Lawrie's palm where the blisters were beginning to peel white.

Lawrie pulled her close and waved again at the figure framed in the doorway.

"He's a wolf by nature and training — but he certainly is white!" he murmured against her cheek.

THE END